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Summer's finally here.
Mafuyu, Chiaki, Senpai and I.
The four of us gathered together
to form the Folk Music Club,
and welcomed summer together
for the very first time.
Mafuyu's as unfriendly as ever,
and band practices were
as disharmonious as before.
It was till a certain day before
the summer holidays
when our club president,
Kagurazaka-senpai suddenly said,
"The preparations for the training camp's
all set and ready to go."

Why is that person saying
that all of a sudden!
Is it really fine to hold a
training camp just like that?



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さよならピアノソナタ2



Has unrivaled willfulness

蛸沢 真冬

Matsuyu Ebisawa

"Training camp.....?"
You don't want to go?
"..... I don't know."
This girl is still not used to getting along with the rest of the band, I guess?
And she doesn't really talk to me much either.



The drummer from the martial arts faction

相原 千晶

Chiaki Aihara

"It's been a long time since I've taken a swim!
I'll have to get a brand new swimsuit first~"
So you don't really care about practice either huh.
"I know, we've got to practice too, right?
We can do squat jumps at the beach during the evening."
What sort of training is that!
That's the reason why you're overly sports-oriented.



The girl who lives for romance and revolution

神楽坂 響子

Kyouko Kagurazaka

"We think of swimsuits whenever we talk about summer, and we relate swimsuits to going to the beach for a training camp, right?"
There's something wrong with the sequence of your association, yeah?
Moreover, we're going there to practice, no?
"Oops, I've accidentally revealed my true intentions."
It can't be that you actually just want to see the rest of us in our swimsuits, right?

In any case, the summer that I was waiting for in anticipation along with a sense of uneasiness has finally begun.

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1

Chapter 1

The Real Name



I wish to go to the beach!



1



"How do I pronounce your name?"

It was the end of the semester when Mafuyu asked me that question during a certain Monday after school. Then, the door of the classroom was opened, and the school's courtyard was right outside of it. The cries of the cicadas came from the shades of the trees from some unknown direction, and it was quite irritating. I was pressing my face against the floor and trying to secure the screws at the bottom of the door with a screwdriver. I thought I heard wrong, so I lifted my body—

"What? Did you just say something?"

On the left hand side of the narrow classroom, was Mafuyu sitting on the long desk next to the drum set. She was pressing the cold Oolong bottle that I just bought for her against her face. She's probably quite bad with the heat, huh? Not only was her face redder than usual - even the back of her neck which was hidden between her maroon colored hair, as well as her arms beneath the short sleeves of her summer uniform, were dyed in a color of pale red. However, she wasn't sweating one bit. Her navy blue eyes seemed a little dazed.

"Your name. I still don't know how to pronounce your name."

How to pronounce my name? We're from the same class, we sit next to each other, and we're even together during club activities, and yet she still doesn't know? But..... thinking about it a little deeper, there was probably no chance for her to know. This girl just came back from overseas not too long ago, so she probably isn't that good with Kanji.

"Everyone calls you Nao this, Nao that - I have no idea how to pronounce the rest of your name. Naoki?"

"Nah, that's not it," she probably read it wrong. "Urm..... why are you suddenly





asking this?"

"Because you're always addressing me directly with my name! It just feels unfair."

Unfair huh? With the current situation, I just can't change the way I address you from Mafuyu to 'Ebisawa-san' even if you want me to (moreover, she'll get angry if I do that). We'll probably be misunderstood even more easily if she directly calls me by my name too right? But it's not like we aren't misunderstood already anyway.
[TLNote: I usually skip the -san and -chan, but just so you know, he calls Mafuyu without any honorific]

"..... It's pronounced Naomi. It sounds really girly, so everyone calls me Nao."

"I see. Naomi."

"Yes?"

"Just trying it out. You don't like it?"

I don't hate it, but..... it's just a little embarrassing. I shifted my gaze away from Mafuyu's face, and returned to squatting next to the door.

"Naomi."

"Can you stop calling me randomly if there's nothing going on?"

"No, there's a reason to call you this time."

I lifted my head, and saw Mafuyu gently shaking the bottle in her hand.

"That's something simple, so open it yourself."





Just as I was about to say that, I remembered about how her fingers are immobile. I placed the screwdriver down, and went to her side to twist open the cap. She took the bottle from me without even saying thanks, and took a huge gulp from it. Her expression changed immediately, and she stuck out her tongue in disgust.

"What's wrong?"

"It's so bitter! There wasn't any sugar added to this Oolong tea. Idiot, why did you buy this kind?"

No, you don't normally add sugar to Oolong tea, yeah? Ah, hold on a second..... "Is this your first time drinking Oolong tea from Japan?" Well, she has been living abroad since she was young. I remember that iced Oolong tea do originated from Japan, although China became the major exporter of the tea later. I also heard that Oolong tea with sugar added to it has become mainstream in other countries.

"The one I drank during the China tour was actually really sweet! No, I can't drink this."

Mafuyu got off the desk, and placed the bottle on the ground next to me.

"Here, you can have the rest."

I couldn't help but take a look at the opening of the bottle that Mafuyu drank from, and then her lips that were wet from the tea she drank. After being together in the same club for about half a month, I did get to know more about her, and one of those things is how insensitive she is when it comes to things like this.

"But the Oolong tea I bought in America was sweet....."





She mumbled to herself as she made her way to a corner of the room, and proficiently opened the guitar case with her left hand, from which she took out her favorite Stratocaster. The way she tunes it is really unique - she uses only her left hand. Her index finger will press gently against the nodal points, while her little finger plucks the strings. All her right hand does is support the body of the guitar, and she doesn't even use the fingers on that hand at all.

In the end, it turns out that the three fingers on Mafuyu's right hand are totally immobile. According to the initial diagnosis of an American specialist, they will probably need quite a bit of time before they can return to normal. She may have to go overseas in the future to get them treated.

Still..... In any case, Mafuyu came back from America.

Back to the high school that I was studying in.

It's pretty scary how far the magazines get around for their gossip. One month before Mafuyu left for America, there were already several magazines that published colored images of Mafuyu on their covers. The movements of the girl piano prodigy who had disappeared from the international stage two years ago was well grasped by everyone, probably in no small part due to the fact that her father - the 'world renowned Ebisawa' - was travelling along with his daughter. And also, everyone already knows about her fingers.

It's said that during the start of this month, when Mafuyu returned to Japan with her father, there were a lot of reporters gathering at the airport. She disappeared when her father went to take their luggage. Rumor has it that she was taken away by three unknown teenage boys and girls, and after some digging, the suspects were some club members of a certain Folk Music Club that has a secret agenda. Is it really fine





for us to be described like that.....? After that, I made a call to Ebichiri, in order to ask for his help in explaining everything to the media - and he became fuming mad.

Half a month went by before everything around Mafuyu finally died down.

The pianist Ebisawa Mafuyu had always been really silent, but now she has her guitar. For her, the guitar is probably not something she escapes to, but rather, another path to walk on.

After I was done with the door, I screwed the cap onto the Oolong tea bottle. I then stood up, walked to Mafuyu's side, and took out my bass.

"So what's going on now? Why is Ebisawa directly addressing you as Naomi?"

Chiaki, who was late, sat on the chair of the drum set, then guzzled down Mafuyu's leftover Oolong tea as she said that unhappily. As expected of a Judo black-belt - even though her body size is roughly the same as Mafuyu's, with her staring at me with her eyes opened wide, it felt like she could immediately grab me by the back of my neck despite her being quite a considerable distance away from me. I finally filled up the gap beneath the door after much difficulty, and we can finally switch on the air conditioning now - however, there was a gust of chilling air in here already, so I don't really think the air conditioning is necessary.

The problem all started with the Oolong tea. Chiaki spotted the bottle when she stepped into the classroom, "This is Nao's, right? Then I'll be drinking it!" And with that, she was about to take a huge gulp from it. Just then however, Mafuyu said in a strangely angry voice, "I gave that to Naomi!" Why are you girls doing that? Please head outside if you two want to quarrel!





"Look! Since he was young, Nao has always been bullied because of how girly his name is, and that resulted in a psychological trauma for him. As long as he hears someone calling him by his given name, he will be so frightened, he will actually pee his bed at night!" Bullshit! Stop fabricating my past as you please! "That's the reason why I get everyone to call him Nao, so why is Ebisawa calling him by his given name?"

"Who knows?" Mafuyu answered without giving much of a damn. "I will address him whichever way I please."

"Fine! Then I'll address Ebisawa as Mafuyu!"

"I did ask you people to address me like that a long time ago."

"Ah, right."

Till now, Mafuyu still dislikes it when others address her by her family name. Seems like she hasn't completely reconciled with her father yet.

"That won't do. There should be a more embarrassing name for you. Ebi-chan's already taken..... Hmm, since your name's Mafuyu..... how about Mafu-Mafu?"

"That sounds so awkward. People will definitely think you got my name wrong."

"No way."

Using the floor tom as a table, Chiaki and Mafuyu continued with their satire against each other non-stop. I felt the whole thing was rather silly, so I focused on tuning my bass. By the time I was done tuning and was about to plug my bass into the amplifiers, it seemed like Mafuyu was already tired of arguing with Chiaki, who was saying "Mafu-Mafu" at every single instance she could. She directed her attention





back onto her guitar.

With her lips clipping onto the pick, she slipped her fingers that could hardly muster any strength into the loops on the pick, and in the next instance, she swung her hand with force. A series of sharp sounds leaped out from the Marshall amplifiers like a gush of powerful flowing waters. The impact which I felt was as if my spine was impaled by drills, and my body trembled uncontrollably - I took another firm grip at my bass with my sweaty palms.

Mafuyu doesn't use any effect units, so it sounded just as it was: the guitar and the amplifiers - the rawest form of energy produced by clashing the most basic technology of the Fender and Marshall companies together. Hanon's <[Virtuoso Piano - Exercise #43](#)> - even though it should be a very lifeless tune that's used especially for practicing finger techniques, the notes that flowed out of Mafuyu's guitar could never fail to accelerate the throbbing heart within me.

Just as I was shifting my gaze back to my bass, I suddenly heard the sounds of the cymbals entering in. It integrated itself into Mafuyu's guitar while playing the semiquavers, and produced a rough metallic sound. The bass drum stomped in rowdily, as though it was ushering them along. The drum sticks in Chiaki's hands were moving rhythmically with great speed, and it looked just like the wings of a dragonfly that was dancing in the air.

Mafuyu looked upwards suddenly, and halted the performance abruptly. I thought Chiaki was stopping along with Mafuyu, but she was actually observing the breathing of Mafuyu, and she managed to ride on Mafuyu's tempo perfectly when Mafuyu resumed her play. So they are quarreling with their instruments after the earlier squabble? Well, recent practices had always started on a similar note..... and it's all thanks to the club president who's always late! I held onto my breath and gently plucked the strings of my bass. I dived into my own notes amid the machine-gun-esque melody, and searched for my own space.





Suddenly, a gush of hot air flowed into the room via the opened doors, which interrupted the jam session.

"Morning comrades! So you guys are already ablaze? I'm really happy to see that!"

There was a tall slender silhouette at the entrance. Her eyes were sharp, just like those of the Queen of beasts. Her long jet-black hair was tied to the back due to summer, which made her look all the more impressive. She's the president of our Folk Music Research Club — Kagurazaka Kyouko-senpai.

Senpai did not put on the bow-tie on her collar, and the top of her blouse was left unbuttoned to a state where I had no idea where I should place my sight. She was carrying a guitar case on her shoulders. Seeing that she was sweating quite a bit, she had probably just reached the school on her bicycle (if she got here during the morning, she should have placed her guitar in the room first, just like what Mafuyu and I had done). This person's always like this, so how on earth did she manage not to repeat a year - and to top it off, she doesn't need any tuition either. That mystery is probably strange enough to be listed as one of the Seven Inconceivable of our school.

"Comrade Ebisawa doesn't look quite happy today either - what a beautiful sight!" Senpai praised Mafuyu while walking past me to get close to her. Since Mafuyu had no where to run, the only thing she could do was helplessly watch on as Senpai hugged her tightly and rubbed their cheeks against each other. Rather than her feeling a sense of disgust, Mafuyu looked more as though as she was just embarrassed. Also, she was looking at me with a gaze that was crying for help, and that made me feel quite troubled as well.

"Ah, no worries, I won't forgot about you either, Comrade Aikawa! You hair seems





slightly shorter? Hmm, you're still cute either way."

With that, Senpai hugged Chiaki's head and stroked her hair. Chiaki seemed really happy, and she even burrowed the tip of her nose into Senpai's chest. Then, I almost felt like saying "Sorry for interrupting", and just walk out of the classroom.

"Young man, you're the one who fixed the door?" Senpai suddenly directed the conversation topic to me.

"Eh? Ah. Y-Yeah."

Since the door could not be shut tight, some of the noise could get out of the room through the slit below. Moreover, it also resulted in a decrease in the efficiency of the air conditioners.

"Well, it's great that the sounds won't escape the room anymore," Senpai looked at the door and spoke softly, "But that also means that the air conditioning will become much cooler....."

What, isn't that something good? The best part about music clubs is how we can use the air conditioners during summer, no? Just then, Senpai released Chiaki and leaned towards me.

"One of the most beautiful scenes of Japan during summer is how the white blouses of the young girls will turn translucent and wet due to the sweat from their skin. However, due to the widespread use of air conditioning, such beautiful scenes are slowly disappearing from our sights. Young man, what do you think? If we are to practice without any air conditioning....."

"Please, just spare me from that! There's four people in this enclosed room, yeah!?"





It's one of the things that I found out only after I had joined this club which consists of three girls and a guy..... and that is: the fact that Kagurazaka-senpai liking girls is really true. I originally thought she was just joking, but whatever things this person says is really true.

"How about we all splash some water onto ourselves before the start of our practice?" Chiaki suggested.

"Definitely not! You'll damage the instruments like that," Mafuyu raised a surprisingly serious objection.

"Comrade Aihara, you don't get it. Sweat is not just water with salt, but blood that we proletarians bleed, all for the sake of revolution!"

Chiaki tilted her head - she probably had no idea what Senpai was talking about. Well, me too.

"Then how about we all go to a cooler place to practice? I wish to go to the beach!"

"How do you practice at the beach....."

"Nah, you can! In fact, I've already borrowed a villa."

Senpai suddenly said that, which made me turn my head around in shock. A villa?

"A training camp in summer! We head off on the twenty-eighth of July, and it will be for three days and two nights. Since I've snatched the villa from a friend of mine, the accommodation will be totally free - moreover, the villa is located right next to the beach!"

And with that, Senpai took out a stack of A4-sized handouts from a pocket in the





guitar case, which she had made unknown to all of us. The words 'Details for the Folk Music Club's summer camp' were written on it. I was rooted on the ground due how sudden everything was.

"Wow, awesome! Nao, take a look, quickly!"

Chiaki stepped over the drum set and passed me the top piece of handouts. I absolutely could not comprehend why the handouts have to be printed in color, but the image of a white villa standing in solidarity in the evening next to the beach do look rather sassy.

"No, well..... wait, this is the first time I'm hearing about the training camp. Did Senpai obtain permission from the teacher?"

"Nope! On the surface, it's just the four of us heading to the beach to play."

Is that fine..... Is that really alright?

"If we were to obtain permission from the school before we organize an official training camp, then the teacher-in-charge will have to follow along as well, right? If so, things will become much more troublesome and complicated. Miss Maki is a beauty, and I do wish to see her in her swimsuit. However, recently, I am really not interested in people who are older than me."

"Eh? Ah, urm, what should I say— no wait!"

I slapped my hand onto the cymbals next to me without second thought. What the heck is this person saying!

"Why did you decide the date by yourself?"





"No worries. Comrade Aihara's swimming lessons falls on the Mondays and Fridays, and I had deliberately avoided the dates for Mafuyu's checkups. Young man should not have any special plans for the summer holidays, right?"

"What did you say?"

"Do you have anything planned out?"

No, I don't. Sorry for that. Then again, how did that person manage to find out our schedules for the summer holidays in such great details?

"Nao, don't you want to participate? It's at the beach, you know? The beach!"

Chiaki said that enthusiastically as she repeatedly stepped on the pedals of the bass drum. I took another look at the photo of the villa. A training camp huh..... There's no adults around us, and we will be in control of our own time from morning till night - we can hold practices, have impromptu performances, and even play with the fireworks at night. Looks pretty interesting..... No wait, hold on a second!

"Look, Senpai. You said you've borrowed a villa, and that means there will only be the four of us there, right?"

"Yeah! No caretakers. No rental fees. Though in return, we will have to clean up the villa."

"And that means we'll have to take care of our own food as well?"

"But of course."

Even though deep within me, I already knew it would be pointless to ask, I still gave it a shot anyway.





"..... Senpai, do you know how to cook?"

Senpai shook her head as she flashed a slight smile. I sighed. Chiaki's totally hopeless in cooking, and with Mafuyu's fingers in that state.....

"From what I know from Comrade Aihara, it seems like you are quite adept at cooking, since you've been living together with your father for a long period of time. I'll be looking forward to it."

Ah, whatever. I am the one who cooks the three meals when I am at home during the holidays anyway. Though the portion has increased to four, the time and effort spent on cooking will be the same as before. Moreover, if we are at the beach, then even a simple bento will taste delicious over there.

Oh, are we gonna swim? Will they be wearing swimsuits? I've only seen Chiaki in the swimwear designated by the school. Senpai has a really good figure, so she may bring along something really flashy? As for Mafuyu, she doesn't even attend the swimming lessons at all..... No wait, calm down, me! We are going there to practice, not to swim and suntan ourselves!

Then, I realized something — Mafuyu hadn't said a single word. She was sitting on the desk and staring at the training camp handout while clutching at it tightly with her hands. The expressions on her face suggested that she's troubled by something. The guitar at her chest was about to slip down from her knees.

"..... Comrade Ebisawa? What's wrong? Are the dates inconvenient for you?"

Mafuyu shook her head in reply to Senpai's question.

"If it is inconvenient for you, do tell me about it."





"It's nothing. Let's continue our practice."

After murmuring that in response, she stuffed the handout into the pocket of her guitar case, then grabbed onto the neck of her guitar. So there's really something that's bothering her? Does she not want to go to the training camp at the beach?

Kagurazaka-senpai did not press on any further either, and took out her own guitar as well.

I recalled that day - the things that happened on the day when Mafuyu returned from America. The procedures for Mafuyu joining the club was done in the female restroom at the Narita airport.

Back then, I was outside on lookout. What sort of expression did Mafuyu have when she signed the club application form? What did they talk about? I had absolutely no idea.

After returning to my class, Mafuyu still wore a grumpy expression on her face, just as before; and she was as defensive as ever when it came to interacting with the rest of our classmates. Those classmates of mine too - despite knowing about Mafuyu's fingers, they still treat her like they did before she went to America, and teased her like she was some wild cat who's wary of humans.

Everything that happened before that seemed like an illusion. Nothing's changed. The only difference is that Mafuyu has started to participate in the club activities with us.

"Naomi, there's too much syncopation. It feels really uncomfortable."

"Naomi, stop being led away by my shuffle rhythms. Play your quavers properly."





During our practice, Mafuyu only complained about me — though part of the reason was because I was the person with the lousiest techniques.

During these two weeks, the conversations between Mafuyu and I increased, though most of them were about things related to music. Therefore, I did not have the slightest idea about what Mafuyu is thinking when she is together with the band.





Chapter 2

Problems Between the Two



You can't!





The next morning, Mafuyu reached the classroom slightly later than I did, and the expression on her face seemed slightly complicated. After stealing a glance at me, she sat down at her seat, and her gaze has been fixed on her table ever since.

"Nao. Nao."

Class-rep Terada and a bunch of girls that were following her around came up to me. She then asked,

"Help me say 'Good morning' to the Princess. Then tell her it's basic courtesy for her to greet others in the morning."

"You tell her that yourself." Also, we sit next to each other, so Mafuyu probably heard what you're saying, yeah?

"It just feels like the Princess isn't in a good mood today. Or rather, she can't say what's on her mind."

"Hey, did Nao quarrel with her again? Or did something happen?"

The reason everyone addresses Mafuyu as 'Princess', and why my role is to convey messages to her on behalf of the class — I'll just skip explaining those things since it's slightly complicated. In short, Mafuyu is still as unsociable as ever - so why is the group of girls led by Terada still worrying about her? Are my classmates a bunch of saints? Well, it's not like I'm in a position to be saying that either.

In the end, I didn't manage to strike a conversation with Mafuyu, who was giving off a gloomy aura around her. The first person who got close to Mafuyu that day was actually Chiaki, who managed to dash into the classroom before the preparatory bell rang.





"Good morning! Morning to you too, Mafu-Mafu!"

Chiaki's seat is in front of me. Therefore, she gave both of us a tap on our shoulders when she walked past our desks.

"Hey, listen to me. I told my mother about the training camp yesterday. She said that since we don't need to pay for accommodations, I'll actually have to fork out the rest of the expenses from my own pocket money. Isn't she just terrible? Therefore Nao, please select food that's cheap and delicious at the same time!"

"Ah. I haven't told Tetsurou anything yet. Somehow, it feels like that fella will just yak about it for half a day."

Tetsurou is my father in principle, but because he lacks any life skills, I am more like his guardian instead. Though it is just for three days and two nights, conditions at my house will become really bad without me around.

"I told my mother that Nao will be coming along as well, and she agreed immediately. What about Mafu-Mafu?"

Mafuyu's shoulders flinched when the conversation landed on her. She remained silent for a while, and kept staring at a corner of her desk. She then finally said the first sentence of that day,

"..... Papa says that I'm forbidden from staying overnight outside."

Chiaki and I exchanged looks for a moment. I then shifted my gaze to look at her side profile.

I see. Ebichiri gets excessively protective when it comes to things regarding his daughter. He probably couldn't bring himself to allow his high-school daughter to





spend the night outside? Mafuyu was probably crestfallen due to that. To be honest, I was slightly surprised, because Mafuyu seemed like she wasn't too keen about the training camp.

"Really? Wow, your father's really strict! What should we do then? We'll continue with just the three of us then?" Chiaki looked at me as she asked that.

"You can't!"

The sudden outburst from Mafuyu caused not just Chiaki and I, but the entire class to jump in shock and turn our heads around. Mafuyu stood up, and I didn't know if it was because she noticed my gaze, but her face flushed red in an instant. She then bit on her lips hard, and sat back down.

I didn't know what I did to make her angry again, and I tried coming up with something to say. Just then, it was the guys turn to approach me.

"What's going on with this talk about a training camp? Nao, you better explain this."

"That's right. You're under obligations to explain things properly."

"I'll never allow something that enviable, like how you club members are going to a training camp together, to happen."

Ah~ this group of busybodies are coming over yet again. It seems like my classmates have been directing their attention to our conversation this whole time. Do you guys have a little too much time on your hands or something?

"Where are you guys going for your training camp?"

"The beach! And we're gonna stay at a villa that looks like the gingerbread house."





Chiaki answered before I could even stop her. At the same time, I could feel the atmosphere around me heating up in an instant.

"Beach? Did you say beach? The Folk Music Club's going to the beach together? You gotta be kidding."

"W-Wait a second! Nao, I'll join your club right now."

"I'll lend you my digital camera, so remember to take pictures of them in swimsuits!"

"Nao, I beg you, please hire me as the errand boy for the club."

Just as I was about to chase away the group of excited boys who were inching closer and closer to my seat, the bell for class finally rang. And with that, our teacher stepped into the class.

"That's quite a problem we have here."

It was a rare occasion where all four of us gathered immediately in the practice room right after class. Kagurazaka-senpai crossed her arms and said,

"Ebisawa Chisato should be flying off to Boston for a recording during the period of our training camp, so I thought things would just work out from there."

"How did you know?" The originally silent and grumpy Mafuyu suddenly lifted her head and asked.

"Well, I can get my hands on that sort of information if it concerns my beloved comrades. Let us just lock our sights on the period of time where Ebisawa Chisato is





not in Japan, and plan our schedules according to that."

As expected from Senpai, her preparations beforehand were done incredibly well - though I don't quite feel that has anything to do with love as she had said. No, wait a second! Senpai, are you planning to go ahead with the training camp despite not obtaining Ebichiri's approval?

"There's no point in asking him. If he knows his daughter is staying overnight outside, that guy will definitely abandon his recording in a flash to get Mafuyu back."

I recalled the incident last month - that father had even cancelled a concert at the last minute. If he heard about how his daughter staying overnight outside, he will definitely just abandon all of his scheduled recordings.

"I'm fine..... you three can go by yourselves."

"Didn't you just yelled 'You can't!' not too long ago?"

"T-T-That's because....."

Mafuyu glared at me with her face flushed red. She then shook her head hard. What exactly does she want?

"There's no point for us to dump Comrade Ebisawa and go to the training camp by ourselves. We can only practice when the four of us are there together."

Mafuyu lowered her head after hearing Senpai's words.

I suddenly thought of something: perhaps it has nothing to do with her father allowing her to participate the training camp or not, but instead, she herself might not





be interested in joining us? Somehow it felt like that's what it seemed to be, judging from Mafuyu's expressions ever since we talked about the training camp yesterday.

Chiaki clapped her hands together and said, "I know! Why don't we just hold the training camp at Mafu-Mafu's house?"

Mafuyu shot an ice-cold glance in her direction, which was cold enough to freeze the cries of the cicadas. Kagurazaka-senpai said nothing, and instead patted Chiki's head as she said, "there, there." She didn't actually tsukkomi her - so Senpai can actually be quite considerate sometimes.

"I guess we've no choice. I've miscalculated this time. I'll try to come up with something, even though we are quite tight on time."

"What do you mean..... by 'something'?"

Having noticed the sinister smile appearing on Senpai's face, I was having a bad feeling about all of this.

"Hmm? I can't say it now. Hey, didn't I say it before? All I'm doing is sowing the seeds. I myself don't know where the seeds will land, how they will sprout, or what the colors of the bloomed flowers will be."

Those might sound like they were the lyrics of some song, but she really wasn't joking.

A few days later, I saw the flowers that bloomed from the seeds which Senpai had sowed, and I couldn't help but be shocked by the results.





It happened on a Friday. The first semester was about to end, so the onslaught of after-class remedial burned all my time, so much so that I didn't even have any time left to attend the club. After school, the setting sun looked like it was cooked. I walked back home wearily while being grilled by the rays of the burning sun. When I reached my house, I saw a large foreign-made car that was parked in the garage of our house.

No wait - I remember seeing it somewhere before?

I didn't have a good feeling about this, so I opened the door gently. My dad's a music critic who does not clear up anything, and he's also ranked the world's number six hopeless man. Therefore, the entrance and the walkway are filled with unsorted CDs and records. However, as I walked into the house carefully, I was not greeted by blasts of classical music coming from the living room. Instead, that was replaced by the sounds of a conversation. There's someone else in there other than Tetsurou? It's been months since we've had a guest here in the house.

"I'm bac—k....."

I pulled open the door, and I was rendered speechless by the scene.

"So you're back, Nao? Help me brew a cup of coffee, and add in extra brandy. Give this guy here a cup of plum-kelp tea. Oh right, Ebichiri, why must you always choose <[Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn](#)> for all of your encores? I feel like sleeping once I hear that. Choose <[Academic Festival Overture](#)> for your next performance instead!"

Tetsurou was still the same as usual: he's wearing the complete jersey wear, and sitting crossed-legged on the sofa lazily. Opposite of him was Ebisawa Chisato, who had an irritated expression on his face. He was wearing a black-colored sweater and well-ironed suit pants. Even though his attire was slightly more casual, his hairstyle





was still the same as a lion's mane, that's frequently seen on his CD covers - yup, it's Ebichiri all right.

"Sorry for disturbing," he greeted me, but I took a step back subconsciously.

"H-Haa..... Welcome."

"Nao, go make the coffee, quickly." Tetsurou was urging me without even looking at me, and that made me want to slam my fist into the back of his head. "Even if he is a guest performer, you can't just allow him to choose the pieces as he please. Or are you implying that since it is an encore, you can just play according to your personal preferences?"

"If you don't like it, you can always leave before the encore. It's the publisher that's paying for your concert tickets anyway. Isn't that right?"

"Whoa, Nao, you heard that? You heard that? This person here actually said something like that to his audience."

What does that have to do with me? I escaped into the kitchen without a second thought.

I tried to grasp hold of the situation while waiting for the water to boil. Why is Ebichiri here at my house?

Even though he is an old acquaintance of Tetsurou, I still have difficulty believing that those two had actually graduated from the same year at the College of Music. Ebichiri exudes the aura and dignity of a maestro, and fully exemplifies the word 'seasoned' which is used to describe him. In comparison, if I am to lie and say that Tetsurou has been repeating his years in college all the way till now, everyone may just really believe me and direct pitiful stares at him.





Just as I was taking two cups of coffee to them, their conversations was becoming even more heated.

"All you know is breaking up the music that you've listened to and savoring them in bits and pieces, so what's with those haughty words? What I emphasize is the coherence of the rhythm of the music! The pause in between the movements is not there for me to clear my throat!"

"Shut up, snobbish conductor! You've just copied Furtwängler for your take on the [<Symphony No. 4 in E minor>](#) of Brahms', didn't you? You can't just emphasize the ending and think that it will be great just like that. Nao, that's how you feel as well after listening to that, right?"

Hey, stop dragging me into this already!

"Right, I want to seek your opinions too. You're the one who wrote the commentary for my 'Complete Collection of Brahms' Symphonies', right?"

I nearly spilled the cup of coffee that was in front of Ebichiri. W-Why does he know about this?

"What's with that surprised reaction of yours? Probably all of my close friends know about it already. It's because I feel really proud about it."

"Ehhhhhhhhhhh?"

I immediately hugged the tray and squatted down on the spot.

The reason I helped Tetsurou write his music critiques or CD commentaries was just because I wanted to earn some pocket money. Of course, in order to hide the truth, I





specifically mimicked Tetsurou's writing style. Damn you! Don't let others know! Your credibility will lower if you do that, right!?

"You're a critic as well, so you should have differing views from Hikawa, right? Hikawa always wrote critiques that strayed away from the main topic - he thought that it is unnecessary for me to emphasize on the agogic accents and the dynamics at the same time."

"Since when do I go off-topic!? Your ring finger will move along when your try to move your little finger, right? See, it's something like that. You've mixed up your agogic accents and your dynamics together. Nao, you tell him too."

"Urm..... What exactly is agogic accent?"

I am just a high school student who's in my first year, so I still have to research my way through a huge pile of information when I'm writing my drafts. It will be a huge headache for me if you guys start spewing out a string of musical terminologies at me.

"Probably the rhythmic version of the dynamics," Tetsurou answered.

"..... And what's dynamics?"

"The sound intensity versions of agogic accent," was Ebichiri's explanation. Who the heck can understand that!? That's like saying 'the right hand is the reverse of the left hand' - you guys might as well not bother with those sorts of explanations that go around in a loop!

"Well..... I feel that Eugene Ormandy conducted better for Brahms' <Symphony no. 4>....."





"Mmm. I tried to replicate the way he made the strings play an octave higher - it was quite interesting. It's probably only the Germans who will complain that it is 'not German enough' anyway."

"I'll say that too! Speaking of which, that sounds really interesting. So you've actually done something like that before? At which concert did you do it? Boston's? Did you record it down? What a pity. I could have criticized it with all my might if it was released on CD."

Great, I've successfully managed to divert the topic. Just as I was about to escape from the living room, a voice from behind called me out.

"Ah, hold on a second. The reason I came here today is because I want to talk with you about something."

I froze for a full two seconds, before turning around slowly.

"..... Eh?" My voice went out of tune.

"Hikawa, I'm sorry, but can you please leave us alone for a moment? I wish to speak to him in private."

"Hey, wait....." Tetsurou was much more surprised than I was. "Hold on, what do you want to discuss with Nao? It can't be that you want his hand in marriage? That won't do. To me, Nao's someone who replaces the roles of my wife, you know?"

"Tetsurou, just shut up and scram for now....." "I get it already, so just move aside for a while, Hikawa."

With two people giving him the cold-shoulder at the same time, Tetsurou could only pick up his coffee-mug and stand up gloomily. He made his way to the kitchen while





whistling <[E Lucevan le Stelle](#)>. I remember that there's a line in the song that goes something like 'I don't wanna die in despair!' or something like that..... This guy, he always manages to make people feel uncomfortable. [TLNote: Line's probaby '*E muoio disperato!*', which is '*Alas I die despairing!*']

To be honest though, despite how irritating Tetsurou can be, I did hope that he wouldn't go away. I sat before Ebichiri, and it felt so awkward that I dared not even raise my head. What does he have to talk to me about..... Something that concerns Mafuyu? I could think of nothing else.

"You—" Ebichiri put down the mug and began to speak, "have written quite a few articles about me. It has been a while since I've returned to Japan, so I knew nothing about it at all."

"Right....."

Speaking about why I'm always writing articles about him, it's all because Tetsurou hates writing critiques that deal with Ebisawa Chisato. It's probably because many people knew that they were classmates during their high-school and college days, so he must have found it quite troublesome to write them. In order not to receive any jobs that involved Ebisawa Chisato, Tetsurou had deliberately nicknamed him 'Ebichiri', and critiqued him in a joking manner. However, that plan backfired instead, and it was well-received. Thanks to him, I am frequently tasked with the job of writing about Ebichiri.







Despite all that, that was still my first time speaking face to face to someone whom I had critiqued before. I was in cold sweat due to my nervousness.

"Truthfully speaking, I do not really have the habit of reading these sorts of articles. However, someone mailed me some articles about me a few days ago. At the end of all the articles was Hikawa Tetsurou's name. But despite that, the sender had carefully pointed out the difference between your articles and Hikawa Tetsurou's."

Ebichiri then proceed to tell me the titles of a few columns and critiques, and they were indeed written by me. All I could do was stare at my knees and not move an inch.

"There is no need for you to be that tense. You write much better than your father."

"What the hell, damn you—" came the voice of Tetsurou from the kitchen. He sure has a sharp pair of ears - there was no point asking him to leave us. However, Ebichiri and I continued to ignore Tetsurou's presence.

"However, it doesn't seem like Tetsurou is the one who sent those things to me..... Was it you?"

"Eh? No way, I wouldn't do that."

Ebichiri tilted his head. Seemed like he was pretty surprised. If Tetsurou's not the one who did it, then who would have done such a thing? Some person in the music circle who has too much free time on his hands?

"Forget it. I came here because I wanted to speak with you anyway, since I won't be staying in Japan for too long."

Eh? It can't be that we're gonna discuss music next, right? No no, please spare me





from that— just as I was thinking that, Ebichiri suddenly spoke rather stiffly,

"We'll leave those critiques for another day. Actually..... my reason for being here is to talk about Mafuyu."

Ah— Indeed.

"Urm..... I'm really sorry about what happened back then."

"It's alright. It's all in the past already. Moreover, after that incident, Mafuyu has begun speaking with me occasionally."

I see..... Well, typically speaking, Mafuyu speaks only 'occasionally'. So if she talks to you, then that's really something occasional out of the 'occasionally'.

"However, till now, I do not have any idea about what my daughter is thinking. Still, she is now willing to go to the hospital to continue with her treatment, and she will no longer run away from home as she pleases, like she used to do."

"Isn't that something great?"

"But she will ignore me when I ask her if she still wants to play the piano."

Piano— huh?

It's something that Mafuyu had lost, and for now, she is still planning to not touch it again.

"If Mafuyu's fingers can recover, then it is obvious that I hope she can return to the musical scene as a pianist again. Since the majority of the cause of such an illnesses is caused by something psychological, if she is willing to pick up the piano again,





then perhaps she can make a complete recovery much faster. You do think the same as well, right?"

"Eh..... Ah..... No....."

I lifted my head in surprise. A sincere expression appeared on Ebichiri's stony face.

"Actually, I did tell her that I wish to hear her play the piano again."

Ah, I said it. Ebichiri almost leaned right before me.

"Mmm, however, Mafuyu never— I mean, Mafuyu-san never answered me at all. She said not a single word." [TLNote: Well, being Japanese and all, MC felt it was overly intimate to address Mafuyu without the honorific when speaking to her father, so he added the -san. Just so you know. He'll be doing this in the future as well when he talks to Ebichiri, so keep this in mind.]

I nearly addressed Mafuyu directly by her name while talking to Ebichiri. Ebichiri crossed his arms in front of his chest, and gave a sigh.

"Your situation is much better than mine already. She will lock herself in her room should I mention a word about it."

"I..... see."

So I guess the knot in her heart that was created over the years isn't something that can be undone that easily.

"I'm actually saying that with her good intentions in mind, but that girl just cannot understand."





I couldn't help but feel that the words said by all the parents in the world are all the same. There's nearly no parents that won't act with the well intentions of their children in mind, but despite that, they cannot successfully convey those words to their children. I experienced something like this before, when I was six. After divorcing Tetsurou, my mother said something to that effect before she left home: "Leave with me! It's for your own sake." That's what Misako said to me.

Tetsurou never said anything like that, and that's one of the reasons why I'm staying in this house.

"All that girl tells me, are..... things about the band."

I was deep in thought, when Ebichiri's words suddenly jolted my head upwards.

"I asked her many things about school, like if she is getting along well with her classmates and etc. However, all that girl talks about are things about you."

I swallowed hard. Things about me? I really can't imagine the scene of Mafuyu talking to someone else about things that have to do with me.

"Well, it feels strange to be asking you this but..... how is Mafuyu like when she is at school?"

"Eh? How is she like huh....."

Though I understood what Ebichiri was trying to ask, I didn't know how to answer him.

"It's not like Mafuyu.....-san and I are getting along really well. We hardly talk during class, and even if we did, it's about things related to guitars or the band."





"Is— that so? Strange. You and Mafuyu should be rather close, no? I mean, she did come over to your house after she ran away from home, didn't she?"

"Eh, ehhhh?"

Do Mafuyu and I seem really close to each other? Objectively speaking, that may very well be the case.

"What exactly is the relationship between you two? Or did something happen between you and Mafuyu when the both of you were running away from home.....?"

"I said we did nothing, alright!?"

His gaze was really frightening, and that caused me to jump in fright and hide behind the sofa. With that, Ebichiri cleared his throat and continued,

"No matter what, she should be more willing to talk if the person she is talking to is you, right?"

"No..... It's definitely not what you're thinking."

I slumped into the sofa. Part of what I just said was a lie. During the time when the both of us were running away from home, Mafuyu had more or less talked to me a bit about things that have to do with piano and her parents. I'm probably the first person whom Mafuyu said all these things to, right?

Those were things that Mafuyu could say only when she was away from her father's side. Therefore, I can't tell her father about all those things at a time like this.

"I see..... then if so....." Ebichiri directed his line of sight to the coffee mug. "If so— then I probably can't ask for your help anymore. I really do want to know what





Mafuyu is thinking, but as her father, it is really embarrassing when I have to ask someone for favors like this."

So why are you asking this favor from me? This is the problem between you and your daughter, yeah? Though that was what I was thinking, I could not say anything after I saw the distressed expressions on Ebichiri's face.

Just then, Tetsurou's voice came from within the kitchen again.

"Are you an idiot? The only way to deal with a daughter like that is to leave her alone, till she feels like talking!"

Ebichiri shot a fierce gaze towards the entrance of the kitchen.

"I've already told you before - you have to give your child more space. Ah, right, how about having her marry into our family? She's about to hit sixteen soon, right? It's about time for me to get Nao a new mother....."

"Tetsurou, just shut up!" "Hikawa, don't interrupt us!"

Tetsurou snorted, and then he began to whistle again. It's Mozart's <[La Finta Giardiniera](#)> — 'Even if you reject me, my heart will never change'. Damn, he's irritating. [TLNote: *La Finta Giardiniera* is an opera by Mozart. Not too sure which aria the line is from, but based on [this site](#), it should be from *Va Pure Ad Altri In Braccio*.]

However, I do feel it's exactly as Tetsurou said, and Ebichiri should have realized it long ago, right? Though he probably can't allow himself to do nothing, even if he knew the only thing he can do is to wait for Mafuyu to speak on her own accord. I guess that's how all parents are?





The uncomfortable silence persisted for quite a while, and I could not help but sneak a peek at Ebichiri's face. I guess I should just say something? Even if I say the same things as Tetsurou, he probably wouldn't accept it anyway. Moreover, if he could hold on till Mafuyu decided to speak on her own accord, he wouldn't have specifically made a trip down here. Then again, he can just make an excuse by saying that he is here to praise my well-written critiques.

..... Hmm? Excuses?

"—Ah!"

Ebichiri lifted his head upon hearing the strange sounds that I made.

"You want to say something?"

"Eh? Ah, no, nothing."

I waved my hands to brush that aside. I then clenched my fist, lowered my head and got into a deep thought. So that's what's happening here? So you are saying that I should be doing this?

I hesitated for a while, then spoke.

"Urm..... I will try speaking with Mafuyu again, but I may not be able to get what she is thinking. I will tell her honestly that you are really worried about her, or I can try to convince her to have a good chat with her father. Will that do?"

The edges of Ebichiri's lips slackened just a little, and he nodded his head twice slowly.

"That's good."





"Is that so? But....." I wet my lips a little. "I can't say those things to her in school, since summer vacation's about to start soon."

"Hmm?"

"Mmm, which means..... I am thinking - if it is during the training camp, then I may have the opportunity to talk to her about it."

Ebichiri's unwilling expression was shown bare for all to see. The reason that Mafuyu is so easily read is probably due to her inheriting those traits from her father?

"But that means staying outside." Well, that's how training camps are supposed to be. "And I did say before, you people are just high-school students, right? Moreover, Mafuyu's fingers are an inconvenience, and her mental state isn't too stable right now. That is just pushing it."

"That's why..... I do feel that it is not too good for us to continue pushing her like this - furthermore, Mafuyu's stance may just become even more stubborn instead. Should you allow her to join in the training camp, then maybe— she may slowly voice out her feelings."

I chose my words carefully as I secretly looked at Ebichiri's stiff face. I do wish to go to the training camp with Mafuyu as well, and she is the final member whom we had spent so much effort to look for.

"Why a rock band? I really don't get it." Ebichiri continued on unpleasantly, "I can understand her wanting to be away from the piano for a while, but why did she choose to play the electric guitar?"





I sank into a moment of silence. What caused her to play the electric guitar? I don't know either. I originally thought it was just an outlet for her to escape from the piano. However, that doesn't really seem to be the case right now.

If so—

"..... You dislike rock?"

It was only after I asked the question that I felt really embarrassed. I'm actually directing that question to a conductor who is acknowledged by just about everyone in this world? However, Ebichiri's answer proved to be rather surprising as well.

"I am not arrogant to the point where I can answer that question."

"..... Eh?"

"Regardless of 'rock' or 'classical music', those are just labels that the record companies and the music stores use, so as to allow easier identification and classification at the CD racks. Am I not right? You should know very well that it is dangerous for one to critique a piece of music based on the composer alone, right? Even though they were both roughly from the same era, the Beethoven who wrote <[The Symphony of Destiny](#)> is a different person from the Beethoven who wrote <[Pastoral Symphony](#)>. If that applies even to the pieces from the same person of the same era, then it is even more so for the countless music created by the thousands of different people. Don't you think it is arrogant if I am to just point my finger at a certain rack - which is sorted and classified by some record company for convenience sake - and say that I like it or not?"

Well..... It may really be just as he had said.....

"I have never heard the music that you have generally classified as 'rock', so there's





nothing more for me to talk about. I can only say - I don't know."

He doesn't know. This person here doesn't know the place where his own daughter is currently at - is that what he's trying to say?

Then if that's the case.

I stood up and made my way to the sound system, then proceeded to dig out something from the stacks of cassettes. There's only the date [7/6] written on the label of this cassette.

It's the day when the band was officially formed by the four of us.

I placed the cassette into the deck, and pressed the play button. I could then hear a series of muffled background noises, from which came Senpai's breath as well as the feedback of the guitar. Next, was Chiaki counting down by hitting her drum sticks four times. I was once again pulled back in time to the afternoon on the sixth of July.

There was the heavy beats of the bass drum. The heat waves as well as the deep bass filled up the room that was poorly air-conditioned, and my fingers were playing out the pulses of the music. I shut my eyes, and the various scenes replayed in my mind: the reflection of the cymbals that were flashing through the faint darkness; the flushed face of Chiaki who was sitting behind the drum set; in the left corner of my view, was the black hair of Kagurazaka-senpai swaying along with the rhythm; on my right, was the maroon colored hair of Mafuyu that seemed like it was giving off a faint golden shimmer. It was as if Senpai's riffs had split open the sands of the desert - Mafuyu's Stratocaster replied to Senpai's singing by playing out the fanfare of the song.

It's Led Zeppelin's <Kashmir>.





This is the song that lit me ablaze, and marked the beginning of my time with two other people.

If only Mafuyu is around — that was my honest wish back then, and the main reason why I was fighting.

On the sixth of July, the wish of mine finally came true. That was the first band practice since Mafuyu joined the Folk's Music Club. Without having any conversation or any other sort of exchange, that song alone was enough to suck all of us into it. Mafuyu should not have heard the song before, but despite that, the moment just before the end of Senpai's preludes, Mafuyu darted into the song. Her distinct and strong tunes seemed to have shattered my heart, and they lit the practice room ablaze.

Those were no longer the sounds played by the old Mafuyu who coops herself up in the room to play piano pieces. Even though it's still as prickly as ever, those sharp spikes will no longer chase away anyone who was trying to get close to her. Instead, they will pierce deep into the hearts of others, and release her passion directly through those spikes into them.

The four of us are one. In that short instant where Senpai and I exchanged sights, we could see that the both of us were thinking of the exact same thing. Our left and right hand are finally together.

For Mafuyu, this is not a place for her to escape to.

I placed my hands on the speakers, and pulled my consciousness away from the practice room that was shrouded in heat, and back into my living room.

The tune was over. After the cassette stopped with a *pa*, I remained standing in front of the sound system, and for a while I couldn't move. It's because I could still





feel the heat on my face.

I turned my head over, and saw Ebichiri supporting his forehead with his hands, and his face was almost half-buried by them. I gave a sigh. Is that still not enough for him to understand? I somehow thought that as fellow musicians, he would be able to get it.

Just as I was timidly making my way back to the sofa, Ebichiri spoke with his eyes still closed,

"..... Were you the one who played the D, G and A notes? The bass part requires no techniques or whatsoever."

"Eh..... Ah, y-yeah. You're right." Well, I suck at playing, so sorry for that.

"No, that should be the correct way to play. And to add on, it seems like Mafuyu's guitar was specially tuned to the other guitar too..... I guess that's the reason why the harmony sounded so good."

I opened my eyes in surprise. Just as Ebichiri said, <Kashmir> employed an unconventional tuning method by making use of the guitar's DADGAD. He figured that out by listening to it only once? I had originally thought that he is just a silly dad who is overprotective of Mafuyu, but I guess he does prove his worth as a conductor.

This time, Ebichiri placed his hands around his mouth, and stared in the direction of the sound system for quite a while. I stole a peek at the expressions of his face in fear. Did my plan backfire.....?

"Is this..... the place where Mafuyu is currently in?"

I could hear him muttering that to himself. I really heard that.





And then Ebichiri heaved a sigh.

"I am still not too assured, since all of you are still in high-school. Look, is the president of your club someone who's dependable?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah, she is dependable." My pitch went upwards unknowingly. Even if my mouth is torn apart, I will definitely not tell him that our president's the one who took Mafuyu away back at the airport. "Don't worry. She is someone who is really dependable. Not only has she gained the trust of all the teachers, she knows how to take care of others as well. Furthermore, her relationship with Mafuyu is pretty good too."

I slipped in a lie or two without hesitation - in actual fact, none of the teachers trust Senpai at all.

"As it is something that was decided in the last minute, we couldn't manage to obtain approval from the school. Senpai's the one who found the place for us to stay as well. Still....."

"If you are still worried, how about I follow them along as well? Not only am I dependable, I am really good at taking care of others as well." Tetsurou's voice came from the kitchen yet again, but Ebichiri and I ignored him completely.

"..... I understand. There's no choice then."

"I'll leave the things about Mafuyu in your hands. Please try to talk to her about it."

"R-Right."

I gingerly shook the outstretched hands of Ebichiri. An overly relieved me sank into





the sofa - it felt like my back was melting. That's really great.

However, what Ebichiri said next made me swallow my sigh of relief.

"— Right, you've addressed Mafuyu by her name quite a few times just now. Is that how you usually address her? What exactly is the relationship between you two?"

Eh? Oh dammmmmmn!

I tried to come up with all sorts of excuses, and it took me quite a bit of effort before I finally sent Ebichiri away. After ensuring that the foreign-made car had disappeared along the ends of the road, I took out my handphone, and saw an incoming call from Senpai. So she was just about to call me as well huh?

"So Ebisawa Chisato went back already?"

On the other side of the phone, was the slightly apologetic voice of Senpai.

"So it was indeed Senpai who sent Ebisawa Chisato those stacks of critiques?"

I couldn't help but mix in a dash of sigh in my voice.

"Mmm, but I didn't expect him to visit you that quickly. Sorry for not informing you about it earlier."

"Nah, it's fine. I've successfully resolved everything anyway. It seems like Mafuyu is finally able to attend the training camp."

I suddenly regretted telling her that over the phone, because what followed was a





strange silence. I really wished I could have seen the surprised expressions of Senpai with my very own eyes.

"..... I'm now thinking if I should convert my emotional feelings in me into a song and sing it to you right now! Still, you managed to understand my thoughts despite me not saying anything. Don't you think you're really impressive?"

No Senpai, you're the one who's impressive, for coming up with the idea of sending Ebichiri my articles. Then again, those are the seeds sowed by Kagurazaka-senpai. I just so happened to figure out what I should do next in order to smoothly navigate through the crisis, and carried out some necessary countermeasures.

"If that's the case, I can focus on the composition of the songs. I hope to come up with six original songs by the time training camp ends. Well, we do have fifty minutes for our performance."

"..... What did you just say about fifty minutes?"

"Because we're going to perform with two other bands, so we need fifty minutes."

Urm..... What exactly is going on here?

"It's the live performance of our band! The date was just decided not too long ago. It's on the forth of August."

Dooo, the voice of Senpai disappeared. I dropped my handphone on the sofa just as my brain froze. Live? Did she just say a live performance?





Chapter 3

The Reason to Stay Here



.....And that means Folk Music Club
Is your fourth?





It's said that Kagurazaka Kyouko had been in three different bands before she even reached the age of sixteen.

The first band was formed with her fellow club members when she was in the first year of middle-school. The bassist was a guy who planned to play through a song by strumming on a single string, while the drummer could not even multitask to have his hands move unsynchronized from his feet. To solve that, Kagurazaka Kyouko made a ingenious arrangement by asking the girl who was supposed to be the lead singer to help out with the snare drums on the side. However, that girl complained that she could not sing if she did that. As such, Kagurazaka-senpai took over and became the lead singer instead - she even practiced hard on the three songs chosen from Green Day. However, on the day before the school's anniversary, that girl said she wanted to sing as well, and accused Kyouko of being sly. She ended up not coming for the rehearsal. The bassist and the drummer of the band sided with the girl and blamed Kyouko as well. On the actual day of the performance, Kagurazaka Kyouko went up on stage by herself with her guitar, and began her solo act with <[Desperado](#)> by the Eagles. Even though her performance was very well received, the band was dissolved on the very same day.

The second band was formed during the summer while she was in her second year of middle-school. It was a disco ensemble that consist of all girls. The reason Kyouko joined the band was because they had put up a recruiting poster at the livehouse she frequents. The band advertised itself with the phrase 'The Micheal Jackson of Gospel Rock', and she was attracted by the weird but interesting concept that was written. So even though she was slightly concerned about the age difference between herself and the rest of the band members, she still applied to join them. Surprisingly, she was extremely popular with the rest of the members, and they immediately decided to hold a live performance. However, during one of the celebration parties, it was revealed that Kagurazaka Kyouko frequented the houses of the various members to spend the night over, and they had even bathed and slept together. With that, the gathering turned into a messy fight, where even the fans were involved in it as well.





The only person who escaped from all that was the person in question, who happened to be in a sober state back then. The band was dismissed on the very next day as well.

The third band was formed when she was just promoted to her third year in middle-school. She was invited to join the band by the shop assistant of the music store that she frequents. The rest of the three members were all guys, and the average age of the band members was very high - one of them was already married. However, since the band performed mostly British hard rock, which she happened to be obsessed about at that time, she agreed to join immediately. However, that band was dissolved after three months too.

"..... And that means Folk Music Club is your fourth?"

"Wait, hold on a second. Don't just skip the important part and be done with it." The me who was sitting opposite of Senpai then quickly asked, "Why did the third band dissolve?"

As I had raised my voice unknowingly, everyone at the McDonalds - which includes Chiaki who was sitting next to me, as well as Mafuyu who was diagonally in front - stared at me.

"Hmm? I can't tell you about the third band. Oh right, you know about that Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store, don't you? The place where I'm working at now. The owner of that store is one of the three members of the band, and the incident concerns his reputation."

I couldn't help but feel a chill running through my body. I then thought of the impossibly expensive guitar of Senpai's. According to Chiaki, Senpai managed to get





it by finding out the weakness of the owner and threatening him with it. That can't be related to the dissolving of the third band, right?

"I am more concerned about the second band." Chiaki bit onto the straw of her cola, and said furiously, "Senpai, you've laid your hands on way too many girls already!"

"Mmm, I am reflecting on that too. Well, I didn't do my homework properly back then, so I never thought that having a lesbian relationship with girls would result in me infringing on the Immorality Act as well." That has nothing to do with the Immorality Act, yeah!? Man, this person..... why does her conversations always go in that direction?

Since the third years have make-up lessons and exams today, we were unable to hold practice. As such, on our way back home, the four of us stopped by McDonalds together. Even though Senpai said she would be talking about the live performance, the things we chatted about were all unrelated to that, and they were all full of rubbish. That's quite worrying for the members of the newly formed band.

"Anyway, in order to allow the band to steadily make its way towards success, I've decided on three things. First, if I am to be in another band, then I must definitely start one myself."

And with that, Senpai took a look at all of us. This is the first time she started to gather the four members of the band from scratch. Since Senpai's an idealist, I don't think it's a good thing for her to join someone else's band either.

"Secondly, the male-to-female ratio of the band. The first was 2:2, the second had four girls, while the third was 3:1 - and they all failed. I myself am a girl, so the only remaining option left is to form a band with three girls and a guy."

"..... So the reason you invited me into the band is because of a retarded reason like





that?"

After hearing me say that with a dumbfounded expression, Senpai cocked her eyebrows.

"That's not a retarded reason, and that's not the only reason either. I said so before, right?"

Well, she's not wrong. This person seems to be serious at just about everything, but is there any relationship between the male-to-female ratio of the band and its survival?

"Lastly, the final person to join the band will have to come up with the name of the band."

Senpai took a look at Mafuyu next to her. Till then, Mafuyu had been staring at the dry fries while keeping silent this whole time. But when she heard Senpai say that, she lifted her head up in shock.

"..... M-Me?"

"Yes." Senpai grabbed onto the hand of Mafuyu with her own two hands.

"W-Why?"

Mafuyu was confused, and I was too. Why must Mafuyu be the one who comes up with the name?

Senpai took the box of fries.

"This is me....." Senpai drew out a stalk of fries and placed it on the tray. "Followed





by Comrade Aihrrara....." She looked at Chiaki briefly, then picked out another fries and placed it side by side with the first. "Next is young man....." She drew out the third, slightly shorter strand of fries. "And finally Comrade Ebisawa." Senpai then chose the longest fries out of the lot. After arranging the first three fries for a brief while, she used the last fries as a string to tie up the three fries together with a knot.

"See, we have gathered together because of Comrade Ebisawa. We can form our band because of you joining us. Therefore— if we are to come up with a name, it should be written by this person here."

Senpai placed the bundle of tied fries before Mafuyu. She then pointed to the three fries plus the long one, and said,

"You have to be the one to name the band. With that, you won't be able to leave. As long as you don't leave, the remaining three people will never break apart and be separated."

Senpai continued to look straight into Mafuyu's eyes. Mafuyu bit on her lips and lowered her head in order to shift her gaze away.

"..... But I—"

"You can come up with whatever name you wish. Just use the words that you like."

"I'll be very troubled should you say that."

"Why?"

"Because..... I only joined because I followed Naomi along."

Chiaki looked at me solemnly, but I could only fix my sight on Mafuyu's pale white





lips. What's going on here? Why is Mafuyu that afraid?

"Therefore, I can't be deciding something as important as this."

"It's precisely because it is something very important that I want Comrade Ebisawa to decide."

Senpai pulled her face right next to Mafuyu's, and said gently,

"I'm not asking you to decide on a name right now. However, I have to rent the place for our live performance, plus work on the posters and the tickets. So if possible, give me your answer after tomorrow, at the latest before the start of training camp."

"I haven't decided if I want to attend the training camp."

"You don't want to go? Why?"

Mafuyu interrupted Senpai's words by shaking her maroon colored hair with force. Chiaki and I exchanged looks for a moment - her expression was that of confusion.

We already obtained Ebichiri's approval two days ago, but up till now, Mafuyu did not once express any intention of joining the training camp. Senpai and I had already done all sorts of things to convince Ebichiri, but somehow, it was really difficult for us to bring up the matter to Mafuyu, and so we did not ask her if she had any interest in joining the training camp.

Therefore, this was the first time we heard from Mafuyu saying that she was still undecided on going. I felt slightly depressed. To think that we had already achieved that sort of understanding when it came to music, and yet Mafuyu still didn't blend in with us at all? Even for me, I was deeply touched by Mafuyu's music in

<Kashmir>.....





Just when Senpai was about to speak, Mafuyu pushed her chair away loudly and stood up.

"..... Mafuyu? Wha—"

Ignoring my calls, Mafuyu heaved her guitar casing onto her shoulders, then made her way past the tables and disappeared down the stairs in an instant.

That left me - who was halfway into standing up - with no choice but to sit back down in my chair.

What the heck, why did things suddenly turn out like this? Did someone say something that made her unhappy?

"..... Well well. This girl is really sensitive."

Senpai murmured. She removed her hair-clip and let loose her long silky black hair, before heaving a sigh.

"I had no intention of reprimanding her, but it seems like she noticed anyway."

Wha— What's this? Did Senpai say something wrong just now? I have no clue of what's going on.

"Nao, what are you doing here at a time like this?"

Chiaki's fist was about to fly straight into my face.

"Go chase after her! What are you dazing here for?"





"Eh? Eh? Me?"

"Just go and chase after her already, idiot! Geez, you're dense!"

Chiaki kicked me hard on my thigh. I immediately got up and quickly made my way towards the stairs.

I caught up to Mafuyu at the entrance of the train station. Amidst the crowd that were walking downstairs towards the platform, I saw a head with maroon colored hair as well as what looked like the shape of a guitar case. I hurriedly pulled out my season ticket and squeezed through the gates.

"Mafuyu!"

She was at the bottom of the flight of stairs, making her way past the benches. Mafuyu turned her head around. There seemed to be tears at the corner of her eyes.

"..... Don't follow me."

"Why are you angry?"

"I am not angry."

The people around us were all looking at me, and that made me pretty uncomfortable. Moreover, there were my schoolmates among them as well.

"Urm..... then what's the reason for you to act like that?"

My voice was drowned by the announcement that alerted us of the incoming train. I





continued chasing Mafuyu, and went into the carriage without hesitation.

"..... You should be taking the train in the other direction, right?"

"Eh? Well, you're not wrong....."

Come to think of it, my bag and bass are still there at McDonald. What to do? Do I have to make a trip back? Will the two of them wait for my return?

The train left the platform. Mafuyu sat at the empty seat at the edge, and placed her guitar on her knees, so as not to let anyone see her face. I stood right by her side and leaned myself next to the door.

"Why did you follow me?"

"No idea. I suddenly had the urge to take the train to a place where I have not been to before, and take a stroll there."

"Idiot."

And with that, Mafuyu said nothing more. In order to ease the tense atmosphere, I began to tell lots of lame jokes - to be honest, I think it will be better if I get around to fixing that bad habit of mine as soon as possible.

As the vibration of the train began to make its way up my upper body, I began recalling the conversation between Ebichiri and I. We can only wait till Mafuyu feels like talking. The one who said that was— Ah, that's right..... It's not me, but Tetsurou.

That's not what I had in mind though. At that point, I could wait no longer. I really felt like pushing away the guitar which Mafuyu was hugging tightly to, then shove





my face near hers and asked her what exactly was she thinking.

And there was a time where I did say this to her: if you have anything that's troubling you, just voice it all out.

So in the end, she still did not take my words to heart?

Just as the train was making one of its many stops at some station, Mafuyu suddenly stood up. I was almost left behind on the train as she only made her dash out of the carriage right after the bell rang, which was to alert people that the train was about to leave.

It was a small remote station with hardly any passengers dropping off the train. There was almost no shelter at the platform, and the strong rays of the sun from the west were shining hard onto the asphalt.

I could see messy patches of small farmlands on the other side of the fence, a road paved by gravel, as well as sparsely scattered houses.

Eh? Back when I asked Mafuyu about the place where she lived at—

"Mafuyu, is your house nearby?"

Mafuyu carried her guitar on her shoulders with her back facing me. She then turned her head and said,

"..... I just suddenly feel like dropping off at an unknown station."

And after murmuring that, she then began to make her way towards the wicket. Come to think of it, she's actually a repeat offender when it comes to running away from home, yeah? Is this how she usually carry out her disappearing acts? I could





begin to understand the reason why Ebichiri is overprotective towards his daughter already.

Since I had to get a replacement ticket, I almost lost sight of Mafuyu, who ran out of the wicket quickly. I finally caught up to her at the gravel road, which was situated between two corn fields. However, I could not bring myself to yell out her name, and so I did what I'm used to doing - walking quietly behind her at about a distance of five meters away.

We walked on for quite some time before Mafuyu finally stopped in her tracks. She was standing in the middle of a bridge that spans across a nearly dried stream. The reason was due to a [lonely, rusty-sounding electronic tune](#) that came from faraway. It was a broadcast played at various public places at five o'clock to remind children that it is time for them to head home. It's a melody that is played via the speakers at a few specific places in town. Seems like the tune is the same for all the cities in Japan. It's the second movement of Dvořák's [New World Symphony](#).

The same melody came from a speaker that was even further away. It gently blended in together with the initial melody which had already started to ring sometime ago, and that formed a series of blurry canon.

Mafuyu grabbed onto the railing at the side of the bridge, and allowed her sight to wander all around in the air, so as to explore the melody around us.

She mumbled as I caught up to her,

"..... Why must Japan broadcast such a lonely tune everyday during the evening? I had traveled all around Japan due to my concerts, but I kept hearing the same tune everywhere I go."

I tilted my head. That's strange.





"This song is actually played during the funerals in America and other countries," she said as she stared at the stream.

Is that so? It's probably a cultural difference, I guess?

"Well, this tune is later rewritten into <[The Road Home \(家路\)](#)> and <[Sunset at the Distant Mountain \(遠き山に日は落ちて\)](#)>, because it gives people the feeling that it is evening and time to return home..... for us Japanese anyway."

"Really?" with that, Mafuyu closed her eyes and tilted her ears to listen to the rumbling tune being as it was sucked into the air.

There's probably not many people who know that this tune is written by Dvořák. I don't think there're many who know that this piece of music is actually a substitute for a letter to be mailed back to his motherland Czech from the new world America, filled with the deep longings of his homeland.

"..... Why?"

Just as the sound around us had changed back to those of the cries of cicadas and the rumbles of a faraway train, Mafuyu asked me softly.

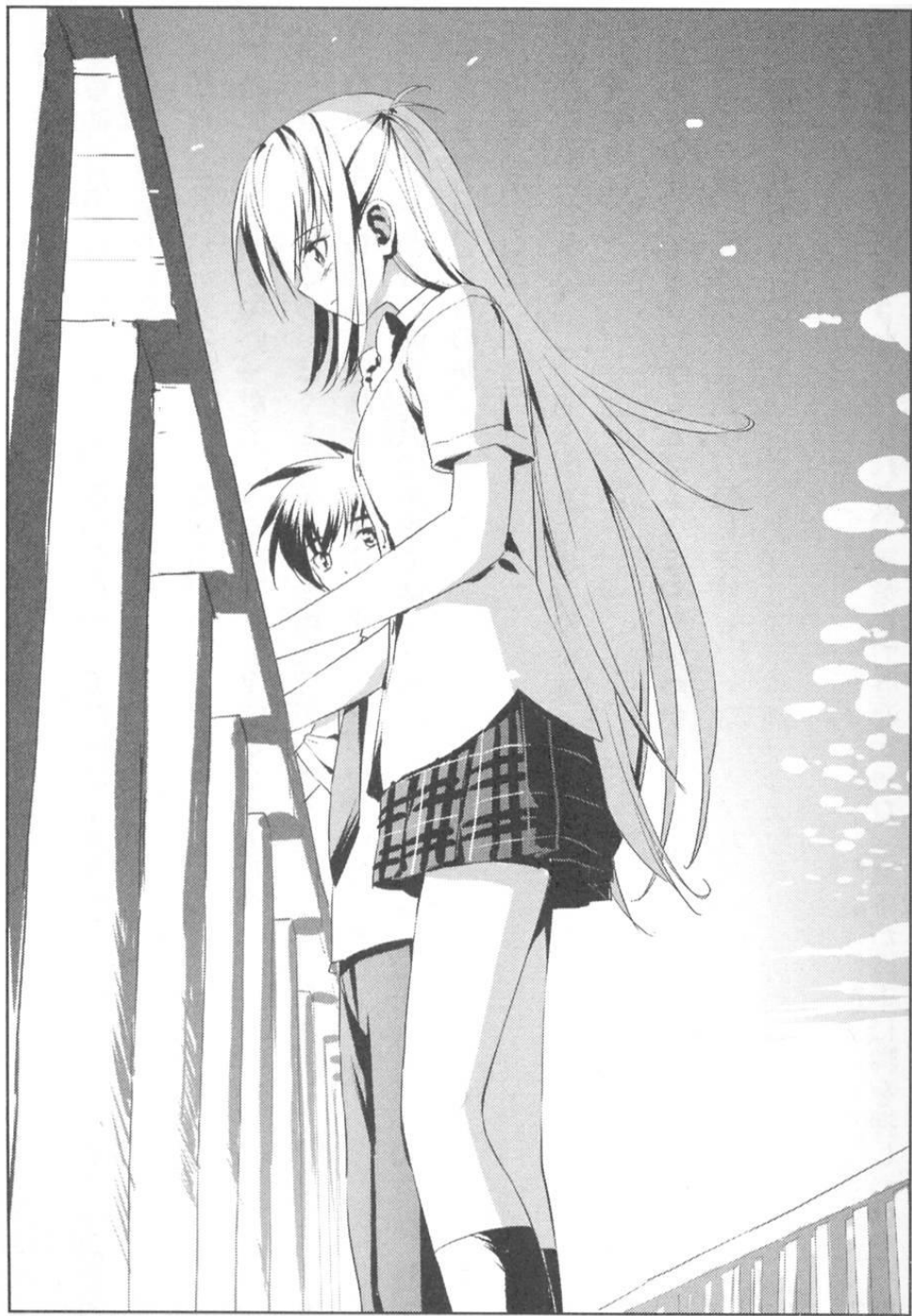
"Why..... did you invite me into the band?"

"..... Eh?"

"Forget it. It's nothing."

Mafuyu removed the guitar from her shoulders, and leaned it against the railing.







"I've only joined that club because I lost my bet with you. It's all your fault."

"It's all my fault.....?"

"Senpai probably thinks that way as well..... In any case, this is something that everyone knows."

Kagurazaka-senpai..... thinks of it as what? So?

"Therefore, I have absolutely no reason to be in that room."

"Nothing of th—" Is that really not the case.....? I swallowed my words halfway.

If we are to look at things by the results, then it may seem like she's forced to join the club by Senpai and I. Though we are all trying hard not to think about it, Senpai had actually sort of noticed it, and so—

"It's precisely because it is something very important, that I want Comrade Ebisawa to decide."

So that's why she said something like that?

"Is the band..... not fun?"

I tried asking her gently.

"I don't know."

What do you mean you don't know!? I should be the one saying that!

"But I feel really happy when the four of us are playing together."





"Isn't it great if you're happy?"

"It's not."

Why? I originally wanted to know the reason, but I could not bring myself to ask. Mafuyu stepped on the railings and stuck out her head to look at the stream. For a moment, I thought she might actually jump down.

"You..... don't want to join the training camp?"

I was that close to telling her the various things Senpai and I did so as to convince Ebichiri. However, there is really not much purpose in telling her those things, just to try to make her be thankful of us.

Mafuyu rested her elbows on the railings, and shook her head.

"Even if I follow you guys to this so-called training camp—"

"You are not just following us there!" I interrupted Mafuyu's words. "Since we're gonna practice as a band, it will be meaningless if even one of the members is missing."

"Is it really okay for me to stay in the band? I don't really know anymore."

"It's not the problem of whether it's okay or not, isn't it?" I really had no idea what Mafuyu was trying to say. "I asked you to join because I want to start a band together with you."

"I-It's you!"





Mafuyu raised her head to look at me. Her face was a little red, and it seemed like it was not just due to the setting sun alone.

"It's all because you say things like that!"

With tears in the corner of her eyes and her body trembling slightly, she gave me a push. I retreated a step back. What? Why is Mafuyu angry?

Mafuyu carried her guitar on her back and walked by me, towards the direction where we came. I hurriedly chased after her, but I could not walk along her side-by-side, nor could I call out to her from behind.

And because of that, for a short while, I did not realize Mafuyu was trying to make her way back to the station. Also, it took me a long time before I remembered that her sense of direction was extremely poor.

Mafuyu stood in the middle of the lush green fields and turned her head around to look at me with a helpless expression - by then, the sun had nearly disappeared down the horizon.

"It can't be that you....."

"I-I am not lost! It must be in this direction!"

Seeing how Mafuyu was walking in the totally opposite direction, I pulled her back while trying to endure the urge to sigh. I then began to walk towards the gravel path. If there's someone next to you when you are encountering any sort of problem, you should tell that person honestly. That might be something that looks simple, but it is hard to carry out in reality. However, it is one of the most fundamental things in life.

The sky was dark by the time we made our way to the station. There were much





more passengers being dropped off by the train as well. The two of us barely talked, and considering the situation which we were in back then, it was impossible for me to follow Mafuyu all the way back to her home. I could only send her off via my sight while standing on the platform. I then took out my cellphone.

"What happened to Mafu-Mafu?"

"Ah— Mmm, she just went back home." I had no idea why, but my heart felt much more relieved when Chiaki's voice sounded as usual - and thus my very silly reply.

"No, that's not what I am talking about..... What exactly did you chase after her for then?"

"Sorry, I don't really know either. Ah, right, where are you right now? My stuff is still at McDonalds."

"I've already helped you take them back home."

"Ah, sorry for troubling you."

"I'll bring these to you. Till later."

Just then, the train that was heading in the upwards direction entered the platform. Chiaki hung up without even waiting for my reply.

Chiaki's house is just a five minute walk away from my house.

However, the five minutes refers to the case if we were to walk along the normal path from her house to mine; should we consider the direct path between us, it would





probably take no more than two minutes. The so called 'direct path' refers to a path that consists of one passing by the restricted area beneath high-voltage wires, squeezing through a tight alley which probably only a cat can get through, then entering straight into the courtyard of my house, before finally scaling up the beech next to the walls of my house, and thus ending up right outside my window. It's a path that only Chiaki will take.

After much difficulty, I finally managed to head home at eight o'clock in the night. And after confirming that Tetsurou's out of the house, I immediately ran up to my room on the second floor. I took Emerson, Lake & Palmer's <Trilogy> album and placed it into the CD player. I then proceeded to relax myself on my bed after pressing the play button. However, I could hear the sounds of the windows being knocked on, before the song was even in its fugue.

"I'm coming in—?"

I had opened the windows so as to allow ventilation, so Chiaki jumped straight into my room through the windows before I had even gave her my answer. She had already changed into a T-shirt and denim shorts. After placing my bag and guitar case next to the window, she unreservedly sat herself on my bed. It was just as though she was in her own home.

"Why did you still choose to come through the window with all that stuff on you?" It should be tiring to climb the tree, right?

"You should start by thanking me first, right?"

She elbowed me in my back. That hurts.

"Sorry. Thanks."





"Is Uncle not around today? I would have come by the main door should I have known that earlier."

"Mmm, he should probably be out drinking or something."

"Oh? Then let's have a drink as well! You should have some sake in your fridge, right? Go get some snacks to go along with the wine."

"I am not gonna drink! What on earth are you thinking?"

I changed my position of lying, and fixed my eyes on the ceiling. Just then, Chiaki slowly walked over. She stuck her head out from above me, and stared into my face.

"Nao should slowly start learning how to drink too! Mafu-Mafu doesn't look like she can drink at all. It will be too lonely if Senpai and I are the only ones to drink during the celebration parties."

"It's because I'm still underage..... Wait, this means that Senpai drinks too?" I sat up unknowingly.

"Mmm. There's no one who can match me in drinking ever since Granddad died. It's the first time I met someone who's better than me."

I gave a helpless sigh. Didn't the law say that we can only drink after we're twenty?

"I don't know why, but somehow, it feels like it's fate that I was able to meet Senpai."

"Yeah, and she's the reason that you began drumming too....."

It's really impressive of her to get her drumming skills to the level she is at now,





purely with that impure motive in mind.

"What's wrong with the motive being impure? The most important thing is to be happy. If only Mafu-Mafu can think the same."

"..... Eh?"

As Chiaki brought up Mafuyu all of the sudden, I kept staring into her face.

"You two didn't talk about that?"

"Hmm.....?"

It seems like we did, and yet it seems like we didn't. Indeed, Mafuyu was agonizing over the reason for her to stay in the band, and if it was fine for her to be in there.

"That means that Mafu-Mafu stayed in the band due to some other impure motives, which caused her to agonize over things? It should be that. Moreover, she's the types who will dwell on even the tiniest details. Unlike me."

"What do you mean by an 'impure motive'? It's impure because of how she lost a bet with me?"

It may be impure - but is Mafuyu really troubled about that? I should be the one who's at-ill-ease by that instead, no? However, all Chiaki did was stare at my face for quite a while with her mouth half-opened. After a short while, she placed her forehead against her bent knees, and sighed.

"I know that you're dense and stupid, but I never expect it to be that bad."

All I could do was forcefully swallow my words back into my stomach. I could not





retort against that at all, because it was exactly as Chiaki had said. I am really sorry about that! The problem is, how can you expect me to know anything when Mafuyu didn't say anything about it at all!?

"Well I guess. I mean, he doesn't realize it even over a period of more than ten years, so how can it be possible for him to realize something that's only three months old?"

"Eh? Sorry, what are you saying?"

Chiaki stuck out her tongue at me and brushed me off. Please, I am really at a loss here! Just as I was still unsure of what was going on, Chiaki stood up and straightened the creases on her shorts with her fingers.

"Alright, I'm going to leave the dense idiot alone and head home now. I'll come up with something myself."

"What do you mean by coming up with something?"

"You will feel troubled should Mafu-Mafu continue to distance herself from the band, right? If the situation forces us to, it will only be us three who will be going to the training camp."

I nodded my head stiffly.

"Mmm. I will be very troubled too. I don't like an uncontested victory, and neither do I like losing without a fight."

After saying a bunch of things that I was totally clueless about, Chiaki made her way out of my room through the window. Coincidentally, the fugue part played by Keith Emerson just so happened to end exactly at that moment as well, and the tune was about to head into part two of <[The Endless Enigma](#)>.





Chapter 4

feketerigó



Come to think of it, she did.....?





Every morning, Chiaki always arrives to class when she's about to be late. It's not because she oversleeps or she has poor time management though, but rather she will continue to practice on her drums in our club room even after the preparatory bell has rung. She came from a sports club, so that's probably why she loves to practice in the morning.

However, Chiaki was really late this morning. Which is quite rare of her.

I didn't see her earlier when I went to the club room to leave my bass there. Even after the bell for classes had rung and the teacher had stepped into the classroom, I still didn't see her. Mafuyu refused to look at me since the day began, and I originally hoped that the tense atmosphere between us would turn for the better once Chiaki got here..... I guess it's better for me to be less dependent on others.

"Morning!"

When Chiaki opened the door (located diagonally right at my back) and entered the classroom in a strangely energetic way, we were already ten minutes into the first period. Our young and timid English teacher even dropped the chalk on the floor in shock. Chiaki leisurely made her way between Mafuyu's desk and mine, then sat down at her own seat. Aside from her bag, she was carrying a huge plastic bag that had a handle on it.

"Teacher, am I considered late? Or was I already marked absent?"

Our English teacher took a look at the clock, then coughed twice and said softly, "I'll count you as late this time, but don't enter the classroom so brazenly next time."

"Right. I'm sorry."

She took out the textbook from her bag. At the same time, she turned her head over





and stuck out her tongue shyly, "I shouldn't have stayed up late last night."

"What are you carrying?"

"Hmm? Oh, I'll tell you later."

Right after classes were over, Chiaki opened up the plastic bag which she brought to class, and pulled out something from within. "Tada!" She proudly showed it to Mafuyu and I.

Mafuyu was stunned with her mouth wide open. I guess my expression was probably the same as hers.

It was a white T-shirt - at the chest area, was a cute image that was designed with the colors of psychedelic purple and orange.

<Ebisawa Mafuyu & LOLLYPOPS>

That's actually what was written on it.

"This is.....?"

I finally managed to get the line out of my throat after much difficulty.

"What's this? The T-shirt of our band, of course! It's really cute, right? I'm thinking, if Mafu-Mafu hasn't decided on a name for our band yet, then we'll just use this name."







Chiaki said that proudly. I reaffirmed the strange name yet again with an unbelievable feeling, then shot a glance at Mafuyu - her face was pale white.

"Well, it just so happens that Nao was listening to EL&P when I went to his house yesterday. And thus an idea came to me - why don't we also name our band E&LP."

"W-Why's my name in there?"

"Because Mafu-Mafu's our band leader. See, it's just like <Hajime Hana & The Crazy Cats>." [TLNote: Wiki link [here](#).]

Exactly how old are you? Is it because you frequently drink with your uncles and relatives? There are times where Chiaki speaks just like an old geezer..... no, she actually sounds older than them.

"Leader? M-me? Why?"

"Eh? Didn't you hear it from Senpai?" Chiaki said as she spread the T-shirt out on the table. "Senpai said that the Folk Music Club is a revolutionary army, right?"

"Come to think of it, she did.....?"

My memories began floating towards the distant past as I murmured. Kagurazaka-senpai is a self-proclaimed revolutionist. As for us, who she gathered, it seems like we are her comrades in her revolution.

"She said that I am the fighter, Nao's the secretary, and Mafu-Mafu's the Highest-whatever-Chancellor."

"I never heard about that before," somehow, Mafuyu was close to tears.





"Hey..... Shouldn't the band leader be Senpai?" I interrupted.

"Senpai's the Chief Secretary. Which means..... that even though the person who holds the most power is the great leader, but that's just on paper. In actual fact, the one who is in control of everything is the Chief Secretary. This is the so called 'Troika' system."

"Is that so?" "You're referring to the Soviets?" "I see." "I learned something new today."

Our classmates around us were all nodding their heads emotionally. Somehow, I was no longer affected by all of their antics.

"Therefore, I inserted Mafu-Mafu's name into the name of the band."

"..... I don't want that."

"Why don't you come up with a name yourself then?"

Mafuyu grabbed the table tightly and refused to let go.

"Aihara, I want that T-shirt." "Ah, me too. LL size."

"I'll just charge you guys three thousand five hundred yen a piece."

"That's costly!" "It's just you cutting out a template and spraying paint over it, right?"

"It's the basics for a band to earn cash through some merchandise."

Just as Chiaki was displaying her knack for business while being surrounded by a bunch of guys, Mafuyu's face was getting paler and paler. I was wondering if I





should speak with her, but I had no idea what I should say to her.

There was a sudden loud bang. Mafuyu suddenly pushed her chair backwards, and that caused everyone around her to turn their heads around in shock. She made a dash out of the classroom, as though she was trying to run away from the stares of everyone. I was about to give chase, but Chiaki was a step faster than me.

"Wait!"

Chiaki gave a shout outside of the classroom. I followed suit and ran out as well. Chiaki was grabbing onto Mafuyu's hand, while Mafuyu was trying her hardest to shake loose from her grip. Shit, this scene's a mess. Just as I was about to intervene—

"Mafuyu! Look at me, and listen!"

Chiaki spoke.

Mafuyu suddenly stopped moving. She then leaned herself stiffly against the walls of the corridor, and turned her body slightly towards Chiaki, with her head held low the entire time.

And I just looked on like a moron - there's nothing that I could do to get close, nor was there anything I could say.

"Listen. Half of the reason I'm staying in the Folk Music Club is because of Senpai."

Chiaki held onto Mafuyu's hands as she continued.

"As for the other half, it's the same reason as you, Mafuyu. You should understand, right?"





Mafuyu lifted her head up in surprise. I could only see Chiaki's back, but somehow, it felt like she was giving off a gentle smile.

"There's nothing wrong with that!"

"I, I....."

Mafuyu's face went red, and she didn't complete what she was about to say. It was due to the fact that the bell that signaled the start of the second period had rung.

Mafuyu left the classroom hurriedly after school, and she was nowhere in sight during band practice. I then realized that she didn't actually bring her guitar today.

"I guess I'll go look around for her. Her shoes are still in the shoe cabinet."

Just as I was about to walk out of the practice room, Senpai grabbed my shoulders from behind.

"There's no point in doing that. Comrade Aihara has already done what is supposed to be done, so all that's left are problems that Comrade Ebisawa will have to deal with herself."

I glanced at Chiaki. She was sitting in the middle of the drum set, and staring at the hand-made T-shirt that was spread out on her knees.

The things that she should have done—

The things Chiaki said in the morning—





I sat myself on the floor. I had no idea what was going on at all. The reason to be in the band? What does that mean?

"Did..... I go overboard this time?" Chiaki mumbled.

"We can leave that for the historians of the future to decide. For now....."

Senpai took out a piece of paper that was folded in half from her pocket, and opened it up.

"Today's the last day..... for the registration of the live performance."

Forget about the name of the band - the part where we are supposed to fill in the name of the band members were blank as well. I felt a sudden chill in me.

If— Mafuyu quit the band just like that. What should we do then?

Chiaki lifted the T-shirt and said, "Can't we just fill this name in for now?" Senpai put on one of her rare bitter expressions and said,

"Mmm..... You know, I am actually glad that Comrade Aihara's not the last member to join the band."

"Senpai's horrible!"

That was the only instance where I actually agreed readily with what Senpai said.

"Isn't that a really suitable name for a cute and loli-loli band like us?"

"You can use that name after I leave....."





"How about having Nao dressed up as a girl too?"

"Over my dead body."

Senpai plugged the guitar into the amplifiers, and used the noise generated to interrupt the silly conversation we were having.

"I'll come up with something to make them wait till tomorrow noon. Let us all wait for Comrade Ebisawa here tomorrow morning! Then I'll skip my lessons and send the application form to the livehouse where we'll be performing."

Senpai then turned her head to look at me.

"It's just a name that we are using for our application. Even if we do not make it in time, it will mean nothing. If there is really nothing that we can do this time, there's always a next. Don't put those expressions on your face."

"Well, you aren't wrong....." What exactly is the expression on my face right now?

"More importantly, have you come up with a rough estimate on the fees required for the training camp?"

"Eh? Yeah, I'm done."

Since our only expenses are our food, I'm the one who is in charge of the finances for this trip.

"Four thousand and five hundred yen per person."

"Whoa! That's cheap. Do we really have to pay that little for a three-days and two-





nights trip? Is snacks included in that?" Chiaki asked. Bring along your own snacks!

"..... That's the price if there's four people going, right?"

Senpai suddenly asked. I said nothing, and gave a nod. It will be cheaper if I prepare meals for more people. The cost will definitely go up if there's only three of us going.

"So the problem now lies with us huh?"

Senpai sighed as she tuned her guitar. What exactly will be Mafuyu's decision in regards to the training camp?

Is she really not planning to go? There's no way I could discuss that with her if she isn't coming to practice.

There's no point in doing all of this if Mafuyu isn't coming!

"Well, it's pointless for us to continue talking about it any further. Let's begin our practice!" Senpai stood up as she said that.

Somehow, I had zero motivation to pick up my bass.

Right here, right now, the three minimum elements required to start a rock band are here - a guitarist, a bassist and a drummer.

If we were to create our music based on our current form—

We can start-up the band, albeit barely, even if Mafuyu isn't around—

Senpai stared at my face for a while. She then said,





"I guess we'll start with some covers. You should know how to play <[Hotel California](#)>, right?"

I nodded. Senpai began strumming the quiet intro with her guitar. Earlier on when we first started the band, we frequently practiced with songs sung by The Eagles. Even now, the club members still did an impromptu play of their songs while waiting for everyone to gather. Therefore, my fingers already remembered the songs that we've played.

Perhaps Senpai had already seen through what was in my mind?

It's said that while The Eagles were recording this song, there was actually a part in the intro where there was an overlap of 13 guitar sounds. Therefore, it is impossible for Senpai to do that alone. Regardless of the few overlapping improvisational parts or the solos, there would be no way Senpai could replicate all those things with just her hands alone.

I had almost forgotten to sing the chorus with Senpai. All I was doing was strumming the bass in a daze, as I immersed myself into the vocals of Senpai and experienced for myself the blankness beneath her voice.

She— Mafuyu's not here.

The practice ended really quick. While on my way to the staff room to return the keys of the practice room, I met Miss Maki at the door.

"Oh, Nao. Come here for a moment."

"Huh? Me?"





Miss Maki's hair was tied up, and she was dressed in the white pleated blouse and tight miniskirt as usual. Though she may be dressed really formally, she is actually a really violent teacher, which you somehow just can't link to her role as a music teacher. I really do hope she won't drag me around by my ears in the future.

"Miss, that's the girls' toilet over there!"

I tried my hardest to resist after realizing that I was going to be pulled into a really terrible place.

"Ah, that will not do."

Miss Maki then pulled me to a turn at the staircase, where the fourth floor's further up from us - it's a corner of the music room where almost no students will pass by once the hours have reached this late in the day. Miss Maki forced me against the wall and pressed her heel into my foot. She then began her interrogation.

"Mafuyu came to the preparatory room just now."

"Eh.....?"

I see. So she ran to the preparatory room huh? Miss Maki used to be Ebichiri's student - Mafuyu's father - back when he was a lecturer in college. It seems like she was close to Mafuyu since way back.

"I have no idea why, but somehow she seems to be in a pretty depressed state. Did you two quarrel or something?"

"Nope, nothing much happened..... Ah! Ouch! Don't shift your body weight onto your heels!"





"I did mention before that you should be prepared for your arms to be broken if you made Mafuyu cry, right?"

"Since when!" Though she did say she wouldn't let me off easily.

"What happened? Aren't the two of you getting along really well?"

"Do we look like we are on great terms with each other?"

Miss Maki shrugged.

"So you're really unaware of it..... All that girl talks about is you and the Folk Music Club."

"Eh? No, that's just....."

Things won't reach this state if we're on good terms with each other, right?

"She's still in the preparatory room, so go and look for her. Just say that it's me telling her to go home quickly."

"..... Understood."

Just as I was about make my way upstairs, the back of my collar was suddenly yanked on.

"Whoa!"

"I almost forgot. There's something else."





I turned around, and saw a smile plastered on Miss Maki's face.

"I heard that you people are going on a training camp? Without asking permission from me, the teacher-in-charge?"

"Eh? Ah! Uwaaaa!" Damn Mafuyu, she told her? Good lord..... why did you tell her that!

"And it's at a villa next to the beach? You guys sure know how to enjoy yourselves."

Miss Maki's eyes were becoming abnormally frightening. I tried to move back in fear, but my foot was being stepped on by her, and she had me by my tie as well. I surrendered myself.

"Don't you think it would be better if there's an adult coming along? I just so happened to buy a new piece of swimwear last summer, but I haven't had a chance to go for a swim till now!"

"Well..... But—"

"Just kidding. It just so happens I have work on that day, so I cannot make it. You must be feeling really relieved now, right? Did you heave a sigh from the bottom of your heart, you brat?"

"Ugh——"

The pain is hell if the choke is applied at the wrong places.

"And so? What about Mafuyu? She said she wasn't going, and Maestro Ebichiri disallowed her as well?"





"Ah, no. We've already obtained permission from her father."

So..... she's already made it clear that she isn't going? Despite Miss Maki grabbing onto me, it felt like I was slowly sinking towards the bottom of the sea.

"Are you going there and leaving Mafuyu by herself?"

"No way..... I want to try talking to her, and ask her along. Everyone will be troubled if she doesn't go." Speaking of which, it's about time you let go of me, right?

"Everyone will be troubled if Mafuyu doesn't go? Why?"

"Why..... huh?" Why is she asking me that? "Because she's our guitarist."

"That's not what I meant!"

Somehow, a sinister smile appeared on Miss Maki's face, and she pulled her face closer to mine. I wanted to turn my face away, but could not do so as my head was immobile due to the tight clamp she had on me.

"Well, just tell Mafuyu honestly..... about why you'll be troubled if she doesn't go."

Why— I'll feel troubled?

Miss Maki's words caused me to fall into silence.

"Speaking of which, you people won't be going there just to swim, right? Putting aside the guitars, what are you guys planning to do about the drums, amplifiers and such?"





"..... Eh?" Miss Maki's grip went loose for a brief moment. I took the opportunity to slip away from her.

"The equipment in the club room belongs to the school, right? You people won't be able to loan them if it's an unofficial gathering of the club."

It is as she said. What's Senpai planning to do about that? Then again, I don't think she's one who wouldn't think about things like this.

"In any case, I've done my part in reminding you guys beforehand! The school will never agree to things like having students staying overnight outside by themselves, so open up your eyes and make sure you people aren't found out by the other teachers."

And with that, Miss Maki walked downstairs. So she's actually someone who does not really dwell on the details.

We used to have music as a core in our school, so the whole of the fourth floor is housing equipment that are related to that. Straight to the left at the end of the stairs, was a door covered with red felt, just like those of a concert hall - that's the music hall that's rarely used. Located along the sides of the corridor that's extending outwards on the right, are storerooms that are used to store all sorts of musical instruments. At the end of the corridor is a metallic door, which belongs to the music room that is used during our typical music lessons.

There was a series of melody from an electric guitar that wasn't plugged in to an amplifier, and it came from diagonally-right in front of the music room - it is the door of the music preparatory room. Its timbre sounded beautifully delicate and gentle.





What song is that..... It should be the part of the harpsichord that appears in <[Brandenburg Concerto No. 5](#)>? She actually managed to replicate the rich sounds of the arpeggio clearly with just a single guitar. As I listened carefully to Mafuyu playing the guitar, I recalled how weak <Hotel California> sounded when it was played by just the three of us earlier.

After the song was over, I could hear the sound of Mafuyu tuning her guitar. Despite that, I remained rooted outside the door without moving an inch. What to do? Mafuyu will probably be angry if I just open the door and walk in like that.

"..... Mafuyu?"

In the end, I tried calling out her name softly. The sounds of her tuning suddenly stopped. Those words that I wanted to say but were frozen in my mouth had disappeared completely as well.

Because— Mafuyu hasn't said anything to me yet.

And I— have no idea what to say as well.

"Well..... Urm, Senpai said that the registration for the live performance..... will end tomorrow."

I pressed my palms against the wall, and said that out word by word.

"Since we have to fill in the names of the members of the band, as well as the name of the band itself..... we may actually have to use the name that Chiaki came up with if we don't decide soon."

I noticed a slight change in Mafuyu's breaths when I mentioned Chiaki's name.





"So, well....."

I tried desperately to find a suitable word..... right, I'll just start from that. I wanted to ask her about it anyway.

"About the training camp. Do you have any reason not to go?"

It felt like a long time had passed before I heard her answer.

"Actually..... there's no special reason."

Mafuyu's murmurs came from behind the thin door. I was feeling slightly relieved upon being able to speak with Mafuyu, but then came her next line.

"However, there's no real reason for me to go either."

"Wha.....!" That's just too much! What's with that!? "Then what did you join the band for?"

"I don't know," came Mafuyu's reply. "I really don't know."

She sounded just like a child who's lost. I squatted at the corridor and thought hard for a while.

"If you attend the training camp, then perhaps you'll know."

I tried answering her with that. Even I myself felt it was quite a silly answer - it sounded like something that an elementary school kid would say. However, there's no withdrawing once I said it out loud.





"It's not just practice. Everyone will swim, eat, and play with fireworks together."

It seems fun, so why don't you try it? Is that not a good enough reason?

I remembered Miss Maki's words: just tell her honestly about what's troubling you.

Even though it was something that has to do with me, the me back then could not comprehend it. And so in order to solve the most immediate problem before me, I said this,

"Therefore, since you're willing to join our club, we wish to participate in the training camp together with you."

Not just for practice, but to play together. To talk about all sorts of things together.

"And since there's no teachers around, we can play as hard as we like! Moreover, there won't be anyone to complain about us regardless of how loud we get, since we'll be staying in a villa. Also, even though it may sound like I am bragging, I'll be preparing some really delicious food as well! Urm, and it won't cost much - just four thousand and five hundred yen per person for a three-days and two-nights trip—"

I realized I was speaking faster and faster, and talking about all sorts of stupid things.

"And so, well....."

I slowly heaved out the air that was jammed in my throat. There's nothing much left for me to say, right?

That was all I could give for the me back then.

"..... I'll be waiting for you at the practice room tomorrow."





And with that, I waited breathlessly for a moment, but there was no reply from the inside.

Sigh. I guess the only thing that I can do is wait.

I silently left the door. While making my way towards the stairs, I actually stopped in my tracks twice to turn around and look. It somehow feels like I could faintly hear the sound of Mafuyu playing her guitar. Dvořák's music..... but that may just be the evening bell which came from faraway towns.

Unfortunately I met Chiaki at the train station the next morning, and was thus left with no option but to take the same train with her to school. It was 6:40 a.m. - normally, I would still be in bed at this hour.

"You didn't sleep well last night?"

As we traveled in the wobbling train, Chiaki, who was sitting next to me, suddenly came up close to me and stared at me.

"Hmm? Nah! I slept really soundly."

I leaned against the bass with my head lowered and wove a lie.

"Have you been coming up with names for the band?"

"Mmm..... I guess."

"So you don't actually trust Mafuyu? I feel sad for her."





Aren't you the same as me? You even made a T-shirt. I originally wanted to retort with that, but upon changing my perspectives a little, I guess that was probably the best thing that Chiaki could come up with..... right?

"I've come up with over ten more names since then."

"Aren't you the same as me too!" Damn, what a waste of energy of me trying to put her in a better light by thinking about things from a different perspective. Chiaki then took out a notebook and confidently showed me a long list of backup names for the band. I couldn't help but sigh when I saw that.

It was about seven plus when we reached school. We went to the staff room, and realized that we could not locate the keys for the practice room in the key box.

"Strange? Nao, you returned the keys yesterday right?"

"Mmm....."

Chiaki and I exchanged looks for a brief moment. That means there's someone who reached the school earlier and has already made her way to the practice room.

There can only be two possibilities — Chiaki immediately turned around and ran, and she almost bumped into a teacher while making her way out of the door. However, she ignored the yells of the teacher, and scooted off from his sides. She then dashed her way through the corridors and towards the courtyard.

Chiaki pulled open the door of the practice room hard, and her shoulders slumped immediately. The me who was following closely behind took a glance into the room, and I exchanged looks with the person inside.





The person in the practice room was not Mafuyu, but Kagurazaka-senpai — no wait, she's Kagurazaka-senpai alright, but w-why is her blouse unbuttoned halfway? Her lingerie's showing from the inside, and she was in the process of removing her skirt—

"Whoa—!"

Chiaki gave a shout. She shut the door after elbowing me who was behind her. Damn, that hurts!

After a while, Senpai opened the door and stuck her head out from within.

"Sorry, I never thought you guys would be here that early. You two can come in now."

Chiaki stepped into the room really quickly. As for me, I couldn't help but feel a little intimidated about it - I mean, Senpai was changing in the room not too long ago, yeah?

Senpai had changed out of her uniform into a T-shirt with the photo of the Cuba revolutionist Che Guevara, as well as a patched denim miniskirt - an outfit that has anarchism written all over it.

"Why are you changing here?"

"Didn't I tell you yesterday? Today's the final day. I have to hand in the application form to the livehouse where we'll be performing later."

Oh, right! She did indeed say that before. So that means the reason Senpai wore her uniform to school is just so that she can enter the staff room to get the keys? What exactly is this person going to school for?





"Speaking of which, I never thought the band members would be here this early. We are really united!"

And with that, Senpai patted Chiaki's head.

"This can't be considered all the members, right?"

Chiaki lifted her head and asked softly.

"Mmm, you're right."

Senpai nodded her head, then proceeded to take out the application form from yesterday from her pocket. She then pulled out a desk from the corner of the room, and placed the opened form on it. There were already four names filled in the box for the members' names.

Aihara Chiaki (Dr). Ebisawa Mafuyu (G). Kagurazaka Kyouko (G, Vo). Hikawa Naomi (B, Vo).

Only the part for the name of the band was left blank.

I didn't want to think too much about it, so I changed my focus onto some other place on the form..... Eh?

"Oh, what about the rental fees for the place?"

It's impossible for us to perform live for free, but I had totally forgotten about cash-related stuff. Though there's going to be another two bands who will be performing with us, the individual amount each of us have to pay should still be pretty costly. However, all Senpai did was show a faint smile,





"You don't have to worry about that. We are the guest performers, so we don't have to spend a single cent."

"Eh?"

What's this? How is it possible for such good things to happen..... ah, this person here must have done something yet again? I guess it'll be better if I don't pursue it any further. Feels really scary.

"Should Comrade Ebisawa not make it in time— right, why don't we just use the name <Folk Music Research Club>?"

Senpai tapped the tip of the pen in the box for the band's name.

Chiaki opposed immediately with, "Eww— that's not cute at all."

"Really? I quite like the name though."

"Then why don't we just use <みんおん>? It's much easier to remember with just four characters." [TLNote: Read as "Min-on". Something like K-On, except it's a short for their club. It's written in Hiragana, but I guess the Kanji should be 民音]

"That sounds just like the name of a pub in some suburbs. I can't accept that."

"Then how about adding an exclamation mark at the back. <みんおん!>"

Chiaki took out her notebook once again and began reading out the names she came up with one by one; as for Senpai, she was there rejecting them one after another lovingly. I sat myself on the stool and leaned the bass against the wall, while





listening to their conversation halfheartedly.

Back then— Mafuyu was waiting for me in here as well. The day that I suggested that we had our guitar showdown. Despite her not giving me any sort of reply, she still waited for me. Therefore, this time, all I can do is wait for her like this.

Thinking about it, it somehow felt like Mafuyu and I have always failed in trying to get our points across clearly. There are times where we can communicate, but there are times where we can't - and with the gradual accumulation of the miscommunication, it felt like there may be a day when they will all turn into an unsalvageable misunderstanding or something?

If that is really the case, then shouldn't I try asking her properly?

That's if Mafuyu is—

Senpai and Chiaki had actually left me alone when they noticed I was there silent and engrossed in my own thoughts. How long have those two went on with their conversations already? The chimes of the bell pulled my consciousness back into reality. I was shocked, and quickly directed my glance towards the clock in the room. It's the preparatory bell right before lessons - classes will be starting in five minutes.

Both Chiaki and Senpai, who were chatting at the table, had turned their sights towards the clock as well. A bone-chilling silence followed after the chimes were over - it didn't feel like we were in the middle of the blistering summer in July at all.

"Young man."

Senpai made a gesture at me. I stood up, and Senpai passed the pen into my hands.





"We have no other choice. You are the third person to join the band, so you decide."

"Eh....."

I stared straight into Senpai's face.

Mafuyu didn't come, so I'm the one—

"But....."

"It's just a name, so don't think too deeply into it. Nothing will change because of it."

Is that really so? I thought to myself as I stared at the application form.

It somehow feels like Mafuyu will no longer be coming here if she doesn't appear now? Should I sever the relationship between us right here.....

I adjusted my grip of the pen—I had spent the whole night yesterday thinking about it, before finally deciding on something. Should the situation come to the point where I'm the one to come up with the name of the band, then I'll just name us <Blackbird>.

However, this name will lose all its meaning if Mafuyu will no longer come here. It will become a name that forces me to recognize the fact that we can no longer fly with our wings broken.

The tip of the pen came into contact with the paper. Just as I was about to write the first character "B"—

Senpai lifted her head suddenly. She looked past my shoulders, towards the door of





the practice room - and then she smiled.

I held my breath and turned my head around.

The heavy door had opened, revealing a slit that allowed the air of summer to gush into the room. Chiaki ran to the door and opened it quickly. Mafuyu, who was outside the door, was about to take a step back. Chiaki grabbed her by her wrists immediately, which caused her to flinch.

Next to me, Senpai said, "Morning, Comrade Ebisawa."

As for me— I could not speak a single word. The countless words were all stuck in my chest.

In the end, I passed the pen to Mafuyu, who was pulled into the room by Chiaki. That was the only thing that I could do.

Mafuyu stared at the pen for quite a while, before accepting it with her left hand. She stood at the door for a long time, despite me having left the table already.

Next, Mafuyu walked slowly towards the table. She wrote the letters in the blank space of the application form, without any hints of hesitation.

feketerigó

"How do you pronounce that?" Chiaki asked softly.

"Fe-ke-te-li-ko," Mafuyu mumbled. That's quite an intriguing pronunciation. What language is that?





"Does your mother speak with a Dutch or German accent?"

Mafuyu and I lifted our heads at the same time when we heard that sudden line from Senpai.

"..... How do you know? Mama mentioned before that she was born in Holland."

"Because you don't usually pronounce the 'g' as 'k' in Hungarian. Nevertheless, it sounds much nicer this way."

Senpai took a good look at the name Mafuyu had written. The smile on her face looked as gentle as the white clouds that were floating in the sky in the early morning.

"You like this song?"

Mafuyu took a while before nodding in response to Senpai's question. Somehow, it felt like she had stolen a glance at me when she did that, and that cause my face to burn.

Which song is that? The pronunciation of <feketerigó> somehow makes me feel like I'll gently fly upwards into the sky in an instant.

"It's a really good name."

With that, Senpai folded the application form and stuffed it into her pocket. She then got close to Mafuyu quickly and pecked her lightly on her cheeks. Mafuyu's face went red in surprise, and she took a step backwards.

"Ah, right. Comrade Ebisawa, just pass those four thousand and five hundred yen





that's in your pocket to the young man! I've delegated him to be in charge of all the finance-related matters."

Senpai said that just as she was about to step out of the classroom, and Mafuyu's face went red yet again.

When the door was closed, Mafuyu took out a brown envelope from her chest pocket and stuffed it into my face.

"Whoa!"

I managed to grab the envelope before it fell to the floor. There's a few pieces of the thousand yen notes and some five hundred yen coins inside.

"Eh? This....." You don't have to give it to me now! Then again, it means that, right? It's that, right? I was not quite confident of that, so I peeked at Chiaki's face, who was beside me. Wow, her face was lit up from the happiness.

"Put it away quickly."

Mafuyu turned her head away as she said that. I placed the envelope into the pocket of the guitar case. It was only then that I realized that my heart was thumping wildly. I had no idea why, but I couldn't calm myself down. I can finally attend training camp together with Mafuyu! Everyone can go there together!

"Mafuyu, teach me how to spell out the name of our band again. I want to tan it out on my skin when we're at the beach."

Chiaki's ecstatic voice came from behind me.

"I am bad with the sun, and I don't know how to swim."





"Ah, we'll have to bring along a parasol then. Do you want to buy our swimwear together?"

"I said I don't know how to swim—"

"Don't worry. I'll bring a giant float along."

Chiaki pushed Mafuyu's back as they walked out of the room.

"Naomi."

Mafuyu suddenly turned her head around and called out my name when she was out of the door. My gaze went past Chiaki's shoulders and straight into her eyes.

"..... Will I really know?"

When she was asking me that question, Mafuyu's eyes still looked as though they were the skies filled with dark clouds. I suddenly felt my chest tighten a fair bit.

"Know what?" Chiaki moved her face close to Mafuyu's to look at her. Mafuyu shook her head, and so Chiaki turned her sight towards me instead.

If you attend the training camp, then perhaps you'll know— that was the irresponsible line that came out of my mouth. The reason Mafuyu joined this band, as well as the things that caused Mafuyu to feel lost—

The looks from the two of them were boring into me. I swallowed hard, and nodded.

"You should be able to find the answer..... probably."





If felt like Mafuyu's slightly uneasy gaze were fixed on the tip of my nose. I couldn't help but lower my head and stare at my fingers. And then, I took a step forward—

"I promise you....." As I said that, I stretched my hand out towards Mafuyu, "That if you aren't able to get an answer, I will listen to everything you have to say."

It's a promise that I had made sometime ago.

Mafuyu's face was flushed red. After brushing my outstretched fist away with her hand, she turned around and ran towards the school building.

Chiaki looked at me with no idea of what was going on, and then she followed suit behind Mafuyu.

I turned my head back to look into the empty practice room.

The reason for Mafuyu to be here—

Somehow, I think that there's no one who can tell her the answer to that. She has to find it on her own. You see, I myself had no idea why I was hanging around here. However, I have no intention of hanging around with the rest of the members in the band forever while having any lingering doubts about it.

I turned my sight towards the empty desk. It somehow feels like the name that Mafuyu had written was carved onto the surface of the desk when Senpai was tracing out the name with her fingers.

feketerigó. A name that ties us all together.

Can we find it during our training camp? The certain thing that is definitely there, that binds Mafuyu and I together.





The bell for classes finally rang. Shit, I'm gonna be late. I locked up the practice room, then made a dash towards my class.

Somewhere among the cluster of trees in the courtyard, the cicadas began to sing.





Chapter 5

Into the Beach

.....It can't be helped. Young man!





I was packing my luggage in front of the fan with my body drenched in sweat when I received a phone call.

"Nao, which is better - blue or purple?"

Chiaki threw me that random question all of the sudden. I could hear the music from <Le Grand Orchestre de Paul Mauriat> in the background on the other side of the phone. Blue or purple? What's going on? Also, where are they calling from?

"You see, Mafuyu and I are currently buying our swimsuit. I've already decided on pink."

"Ah. You guys are at the mall?"

"Yup yup. And since it's already the summer holidays, there's a lot of people here. It's so packed."

So Chiaki really went out with Mafuyu to buy swimsuits together? I was quite surprised.

"And Mafuyu just can't decide. Nao, you pick one."

"Why me?"

"Because Mafuyu says she doesn't know how to swim! And that means the swimsuit that she's buying will be for looks, so Nao has got to be the one to choose!"

"I don't know what the heck's going on in your brain. Pick it yourself!"

"Ah— Forget it. Right, I'll take the photo of her trying on the swimsuit with my phone and mail it to you."





"— Y-You can't!" came the voice of Mafuyu from behind. It sounded like she was close to tears.

And with that, the call was disconnected. What the heck is that?

I flipped the phone in my hands repeatedly - I was actually waiting for the mail for quite a while, so much so that I had nearly forgotten to resume packing. A picture of Mafuyu in a swimsuit huh..... will she really mail it over? No no no. What the heck am I thinking? Mafuyu will definitely reject that.

But it's all thanks to Chiaki that I remembered something - I went over to the drawers and dug out my swimming trunks, then slipped it into a corner of my backpack. Will we have the time to swim when we are there?

The beach? Everyone will be in their swimming wear, right? Suddenly, I began to roll about on my bed for no rhyme or reason. It was only till now that I could finally understand a little of the feelings of my classmates when they were creating up a stir back then. It's just the four of us there - just the four of us, and it's at the beach, and we're staying in a villa. How should I put it? It's just feels incredibly awesome.

I quickly got myself back to normal, and sat on my bed. It's less than two weeks till our live performance. Practice is of topmost priority.

In any case, tomorrow's the day.

"Nao, how do I heat up the water for bathing?"

"Didn't I just teach you that not too long ago?"





"Nao, I don't know where my underwear is."

"How the heck would I know where you put those!?"

On the night of the same day, I tried making Tetsurou do some housework by himself. It's just for three days and two nights, but it would be a real headache for me if he can't take care of himself when there's no one home.

"Hey, it's still not too late. Are you really not bringing me along? I'll be of great help. My specialty is helping girls apply suntan lotion on their back."

"You can start by applying the medicated lotion on your stinking athlete's foot!"

"Nao, you're way too naive. That's no athlete's foot. It's ringworm."

"Shut up! And don't get close to me."

Tetsurou curled himself up while squatting down in the corner of the room, and mumbled things like, "I don't remember bringing up a child like that....." I left him alone, and returned to my room on the second floor. I made one last check on the changed strings of my bass. I'll have to be up early tomorrow, so it's best that I take a quick shower and head to sleep.

We were supposed to gather at the Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store the next day, which is the store where Kagurazaka-senpai works at. It's of a considerable distance away from the shopping street where the closest train station is located at. The musical store is kind of old, and located in a narrow three-story building, which looks like it could collapse once an earthquake hits. Recently, there has been quite a





few regular patrons coming down here. Once it hits late night, the store will become a place where musicians gather and hang around.

When Chiaki and I reached the place at nine, there was a large white-colored SUV parked on the road in front of the store. Kagurazaka-senpai was just about to lift the drums into the boot. As for Mafuyu, she was sitting in the backseat with her body sticking out of the car, and looking at Senpai carrying up the musical instruments into the car. However, Mafuyu squeezed herself back into the car once she caught sight of me.

"Morning! Hey you two, mind helping me carry the amplifiers?"

Senpai's forehead was filled with huge drops of sweat. That's quite a huge SUV that we have here. Even with all the musical instruments piled up in the car, there's still some space left.

"Urm..... who's gonna drive? Can't be Senpai, right?"

I asked that while helping out to move the amplifiers. Ever since I heard about how we will be heading to the beach by a car, there was this uneasy feeling inside of me: is it possible that Senpai actually owns a driving license?

"Hmm? We have our very own driver! He'll be picking us up on our way back as well."

"Huh?" Could he actually be the unlucky store owner?

Just then, there was some rumbling sounds coming from within the store, and a Marshall amplifier which was about as tall as me suddenly appeared before my eyes. The person who was carrying it out of the store was a very tall man who was probably in his twenties. There was a pair of sharp gazes coming from behind his





messy hair and bangs - I could feel his gaze even through his sunglasses. The comparatively high bridge of his nose caused him to be exceptionally striking.

"Hiroshi, I'll shift the amplifiers in. Go get the three guitars and place them beneath the seats."

"Alrighty."

The guy named Hiroshi gave a wry smile after hearing Senpai's instructions.

"Eh? Eh!" Chiaki suddenly let go of the bass amplifier that she was carrying with me when she saw the face of that person. I barely managed to move the huge amplifier into the boot. What the hell, that's really dangerous!

"Hamasaka Hiroshi? A-Are you the real deal? Whoa!"

"Nah, I'm just your average driver for today." That Hiroshi guy removed his glasses and showed her a smile. Urm, who exactly is he?

"Chiaki, is he a friend of yours?"

"Nao, you don't know him?"

"Urm..... I'm sorry. I'm not too familiar with Japanese musicians."

"You don't really have to apologize to me in such a strange manner." Hiroshi laughed loudly and continued, "It's fine for you not to know me, since I'm from an underground band. In any case, you definitely won't be able to forget me even if you wanted to once the live performance's over."





That made me to feel even worse, so much so that I curled myself up on my seat.

I was finally able to make head and tails of things after piecing together the words of the rather emotional Chiaki, together with the casual introduction from Senpai. It seems like Hiroshi's the lead singer in a band named <Melancholy Chameleon>. He's also released albums via an indie record label. Also, it seems like he's involved in the behind-the-scenes stuff like songs recordings. All in all, it means that he is a professional musician. He's also the one who invited us to be the guest performers. Turns out that the villa was being loaned to us by him too. I could barely lift my head up when I learnt all that.

"How did you get to the state of being our driver?"

Chiaki stuck her head into the space between the driver and co-driver seat and asked. The last row of seats were let down so as to make space for our luggage. As a result, Chiaki, Mafuyu and I were all sitting shoulder-to-shoulder at the second row.

"Obviously because I've lost a bet against Kyouko. The original condition states that I will have to lend you guys the villa for three-days and two-nights, which I thought was too good an offer. Should I had known earlier, I would not have offered to drive you all to the villa as well."

Ah, indeed..... so that's how it was huh?

"What did Senpai bet on then?" Chiaki directed her question to Senpai, who was sitting on the co-driver seat.

"I told him that I'd offer myself to him for three-days and two-nights."

""Senpai!""





Chiaki and I yelled at the same time.

"Please treasure yourself more!"

Chiaki grabbed Senpai by her two arms and shook her gently.

"But it is impossible for me to lose to a person like Hiroshi. Thinking back, I should not have agreed on just three-days and two-nights - instead, I should have signed a two-years contract with him."

"Don't be silly. That villa does not belong to me alone. I co-funded it with a group of people."

"How exactly did you guys go about with the bet?" I tried asking her for the details, since I was really interested in knowing how the heck she has that sort confidence in her.

"A karaoke duel. What a stupid guy he is for thinking that he could obtain high scores easily, just because he's good at singing. In actual fact, there was no way he would win against me, since I had already rigged the scoring system."

That's just despicable..... Why did you do that to a professional musician?

"Damn, shut up. I won't lose next time," Hiroshi tapped his palms against the steering wheel.

"Actually..... you lost the moment you allowed Senpai to decide the rules of the duel. I think it's better for you to be more careful the next time round."

I couldn't help but to give him that piece of advice, since I found him deserving of





my pity.

"Really..... you've been fooled by her before?"

"Ah well..... urm....."

In the end, all Hiroshi did was to show a wry smile.

As the car entered the intersection, our conversation topic finally went in the direction of music.

"It's been my dream to play the guitar. However, Furukawa - oh, he's the guitarist of our band, by the way - he says that I suck at playing it, and was thus banned from guitars. Then again, it seems like that person's interested in being the lead singer as well, but he's not that good at singing. Due to that, we frequently poke fun at each other's poor techniques. We'll occasionally switch our roles onstage in secret as well."

He said that the rest of the members that joined them later are their close friends. Which means, they have no relationship with the <Melancholy Chameleon>, right? I was slightly at ease. Even though they are an underground band, it will still be quite intimidating to perform in front of professionals.

"You guys may be the opening act, but you can just relax with your performance."

"What do you mean by relax with our performance? No way. We'll intoxicate the live audience with our singing," Senpai retorted. Speaking of which, what sort of friendship is she sharing with Hiroshi? There is just too much mysteries in regards to Senpai's social circle. Is she really just a high-school student who's one year older





than me?

"You always say that you want to play the guitar, and yet you'll take the mike away to sing during secret gigs. Since you're not that good with your guitar techniques, then shouldn't you just put in your full efforts into the guitar that's in your hands instead?"

Senpai's words were becoming increasingly sharp. In response, Hiroshi turned up the car stereo. There was a sudden loud blast from the speakers. I could hear cheers, background noises, as well as the drum sticks that were tapping out the countdown.

And next, flowed the splendid but overly coarse sounds of the Les Paul guitar.

Then, came the hoarse voice that sounded like fine liquor.

It's Okuda Tamio's live album — <[Umi eto \(Into the Beach\)](#)>. [TLNote: First part of the performance is the song mentioned here. Also, wiki link on [Okuda Tamio](#).]

It felt like the instruments buried within our luggage were resonating to the sounds produced by the speakers, which caused them to produce some noise.

Despite listening to the rough rock-music, I was suddenly assaulted by a wave of intense sleepiness. It's probably because I stayed up late last night to pack my luggage.....?

There was the soundproof wall outside of the car's window. The roofs of the cars that passed by our SUV were glittering brightly under the rays of the sun. Above them was the sunny sky of summer that extended endlessly outwards. As for Mafuyu who was sitting beside me — the color of her eyes were exactly like the color of the sky which I was seeing.





I closed my eyes, and allowed my body to immerse itself into the voice of Okuda Tamio.

I woke up. Turning my head slightly, I could see Mafuyu's face right before me.

..... Eh?

She exchanged sights with me, and her face went red immediately. I quickly raised my head up in shock - it was only then that I realized that I had leaned my head on Mafuyu's shoulder while I was asleep.

"..... S-Sorry."

"It's nothing. Oh, we've reached our destination."

Mafuyu suddenly looked out of the windows and mumbled..... we've reached?

"Hey, come help us carry out the stuff if you're already awake."

Chiaki pulled me by my ears all of a sudden, and that caused my sleepiness to disappear immediately.

"..... Wow....."

I couldn't help but to exclaim in awe as I stepped out of the car.

Amid the sparse forestry that consisted of slender trees, stood a pure white villa that was bathing in the rays of the sun that were filtered by the trees. I could see the beach through the gaps between the trees that were behind the villa.





After making our way past the villa and through the trees, we found ourselves standing on the edge of a cliff. The uneven stacks of boulders stretched its way to the far side away from us. The rocky shores were jagged in shape due to the constant corrosion from the waves of the sea. The sea breeze that was carrying a rich smell of the waters blew against our faces, which felt really refreshing. Wait, can we actually swim here?

"It will be troublesome for us if the villa was located near a sandy beach, since there will be lots of visitors around," that's the explanation Hiroshi gave us. "Don't worry though, the rocky shores are really fun too."

"I'll teach you guys how to head down to the shore later," and with that, Hiroshi led us back to the place where the car was parked.

The villa looked just like a recording studio. As we stepped right through the door, we could see an upright piano, DJ mixer, microphone stands, studio monitors as well as recording devices - all located in the main hall. It's said that Hiroshi had chipped in some money together with a few of his musician friends to buy this villa. The use of this villa is then rotated among the individuals during summer, where it will be used to make some music or to compose a few songs. I see, so that's the reason for them to choose such a remote place? This building is standing by its lonely self amid the trees next to the roads, and we can't see any other structures from here as well.

The sofa and tables in hall were placed right next to the walls, which makes the place pretty spacious. Even so, the space available was reduced by a lot when we had finished moving the amplifiers and the drum set in. As a result, we could only have our meals on the balcony. The ceilings of the main hall were made high, which could be easily seen by the shape of the huge slanting roofs of the building. Seems like the bedrooms were all located on the second floor.





"But we have a slight problem here....."

With the luggage out of the way, Hiroshi suddenly said something while we were all relieving our thirst with some cold drinks,

"Well, since it is rare for us to sleep while we are at this villa, we have only constructed three bedrooms here."

We took a look at each other. It's obvious even without counting that there's four of us in the band. I took a look at the upper end of the spiraling staircase: there were indeed three doors along the protruding walkway that is extending out of the tall ceiling.

"Well..... what should we do about this?" I looked at Senpai and asked.

"Which means, the question now is— who should I be sleeping with, right?"

No, that's not it.

"Well, it will be detrimental to our friendships should I sleep with either Comrade Ebisawa or Comrade Aihara..... it can't be helped. Young man!"

"Definitely no!" "What are you talking about, Senpai!" "That's probably the worst decision, isn't it!"

Senpai seemed to be very surprised after she was retorted by the three of us at the same time. Hiroshi almost fell off from the sofa due to laughter.

"Then..... young man, you shall decide who you want to sleep with."

"Enough! Let's not carry on with any discussions about that."





The final decision was that I would sleep on the sofa in the hall.

Hiroshi then told us the routes to the shores as well as a place where we can buy things, and so on. It was already noon by the time we were done with everything, and that means it was time for lunch. However, Hiroshi made his way into the car and said it was about time for him to go.

"Urm..... I'll be preparing some food. If you don't mind, how about joining us for lunch?"

Though it was a bet which he lost to Senpai, he still loaned us the villa for free, and had even drove us all here. It just felt like we are chasing him away when he is no longer useful, and that doesn't feel too right.

"Nah, it's okay. I'll get really envious if I stay any longer."

Hiroshi rested his arm on the window of the driver's door, and said that with a laugh. He then put on his sunglasses.

"Well then, I'll be coming here at noon on the day after next to pick you guys up. Hey, Kyouko, make sure you clean up this place properly! I'm lending it to you all for free, but there's still some conditions attached to it."

And with that, he started the engine.

"Mmm, I know that, you loser."

Senpai's reply was pretty wicked as well.

"Thanks, Hamasaka."





Chiaki waved her hands hard at the SUV that was moving away from us. Mafuyu remained silent.

"Well then....." Senpai turned around to face all of us. "Comrade Ebisawa, please proceed with the opening speech for the training camp."

"..... Eh? M-Me?"

"Of course! You are the Chancellor of the Supreme Council! The job of your role is to say something at times like these."

"But....."

"Anything will do."

"Mmm....."

Mafuyu lowered her head, and proceeded to draw a few circles on the sandy ground with the tip of her foot. Chiaki and Senpai maintained an upright standing posture while waiting for Mafuyu to deliver. She suddenly lifted her head up, probably due to the pressure from the two girls, and said,

"..... T-The training camp shall go on all the way till it is time for us to go home."

And what about after the training camp's over?

Chiaki insisted willfully that she wants to have our lunch at the beach.





"There's plenty of books that say that the breeze of the seas will increase the taste of the onigiri by multiple-folds!"

"You'll have to wait till two if we start preparing the rice right now. How about sandwiches instead?"

"Uhh— can't help it. I'll give in this time."

What's with that smug look on your face!

"How about we change out of our clothes while we wait?"

"Hold on a second. What's with the sudden desire to swim? What exactly are you here for?"

"To swim and to suntan?"

It's to practice! Just as I was about to say that out loud, I saw Kagurazaka-senpai coming out from the storeroom with a parasol and a rolled-up mat in her hands.

"So you guys are that excited about swimming!?"

"We can practice after the sun's set, so we should swim while the sun's still up. Isn't that so?"

Well, you're not wrong— no wait, can't fall into her trap.

"Alright, change out of your clothes, Comrade Ebisawa. I'll help rub the suntan lotion over every inch of your body."

With her intentions fully exposed for all to see, Kagurazaka-senpai grabbed Mafuyu





by her hand. However, Mafuyu shook her head.

"I hate the sea."

"Why?"

"And I've never swam before. I'm scared."

"No problems. The shores here are not shallow, so you won't be stepping on anything before long - there's no chance of you stepping on sea urchins."

Chiaki, why are you scaring her like that? Mafuyu remained seated on the sofa, and shook her head. I actually thought a little bit about it though - heading to swim right now instead of starting off with practice does seem to be a pretty good idea as well, since that may allow Mafuyu to settle down slightly. However, that doesn't seem to be the case.

"To think that we specially purchased the swimsuit together," Chiaki complained while puffing her cheeks.

Senpai heaved a loud sigh, then said,

"Mmm, I get it. It will be pointless for us to go to the beach when Comrade Ebisawa does not want to go. Let's start practicing after lunch. We can leave the swimming for later - when we're all sweating from our practice."

Chiaki began to tune the drum set at the main hall, while Senpai's tinkering around with the effects unit. As for me, I made my way into the kitchen. The kitchen is a small area right next to the main hall. Sadly, there's no gas there, and instead there's an electric stove. Thankfully, there's a large frying pan, which will be convenient should I want to make omelettes.





Just as I was about to drain the lettuce dry from its water, the sound of the waves of the sea came in via the ventilators. I see, the kitchen's facing the sea. It's a real shame that I'm not able to see Mafuyu in her swimsuit..... I recalled the phone call from Chiaki. In the end, she didn't mail me the photo - what sort of swimsuit did they buy?

"..... Need my help?" Mafuyu's voice came from my back all of the sudden, and that cause me to nearly drop the cooking chopsticks onto the floor.

"Eh? Ah, n-nah. It's fine."

"Why are you that surprised?"

I can't possibly say that I was imagining you in a swimsuit, can I?

Since Mafuyu doesn't use any effects unit, she was already done with her tuning, and had nothing to do. Then again, there's nothing much she can help me with the sandwiches anyway.

"You cook frequently at home as well? Your father said something about it in one of his articles."

"Yeah. Tetsurou lacks any sort of life skills."

Why did he write about his son cooking at home in his articles? I really don't get that, but what intrigues me more is this: why does the publisher continue to assign work to Tetsurou, who constantly writes about stuff like this?

I began to think about Mafuyu's rather amazing life while peeling the lettuces. It seems like that's how a pure pianist is raised and bred - they are not to injure their fingers no matter what, so they are banned from stepping into the kitchen.





How exactly did her despair feel like when she had lost the most important thing in her life - the piano? Or perhaps she didn't even feel any sense of despair?

"So..... I don't really know what I should do."

Mafuyu said that while squatting down at the door that connects the kitchen to the main hall. It felt like there's a deeper meaning to the line which she said - it was not just referring to the work in the kitchen.

I guess— she must have been alone all this while. A pianist will be at his loneliest not when he is practicing alone, nor is it when he is doing the recordings. It's when he is sitting in front of the orchestra, and listening to the solo of the cello in the [third movement](#) of Johannes Brahms' <[Piano Concerto No. 2](#)> - that's something that I read in a certain biography.

However, Mafuyu is not by herself now. I hope she can realize that.

Still..... is it really possible? Can I make her understand that before the training camp's over in three days?

If you ask who in the band moves the most - without a doubt, that will have to be the drummer.

"But even so, you don't have to drum while wearing your swimsuit! Go change!"

"But it's so hot!"

Once we have taken a short break after lunch, we began our practice immediately.





The ventilation of the villa's main hall is pretty good, so it feels pretty comfortable without the need of any air-conditioning. Even so, Chiaki, who's sitting between the drums and exercising her whole body, is already drenched with sweat all over. She changed into a bikini for the top half of her body, while still wearing a pair of shorts at the bottom. I could catch glimpses of her sakura-pink bikini and her glistening skin due to the sweat through the drum set, and that caused me to be unable to concentrate a single bit, which resulted in me playing a few notes wrong.

Senpai stopped the playing repeatedly, which is something that rarely happens. She then actually said this: "Everyone, just change into your swimming wear!"

"Is there any point in doing this?"

"We can feel the warmth of each other through our skins."

That's the logic? That will make me play worse, so no thanks.

However, I knew that the reason for the pause in the practice was not due to my mistakes. Senpai turned down the volume of her guitar and placed it back onto the stand. She then walked towards the other side of the hall - towards Mafuyu, who was leaning against the back of her chair. Mafuyu took a glance at Senpai, before shifting her gaze back towards the Stratocaster guitar that's in her hands.

"Comrade Ebisawa, you have two options right now....."

Senpai raised two of her fingers and showed it to Mafuyu. Mafuyu's body flinched.

"One: change into your swimsuit so as to allow us to feel the warmth of each other through our skin....."

"..... No."





"Or two: you are not to rush ahead by yourself. You are not the only one who's playing."

Mafuyu sat down on the sofa. Despite her nodding her head grumpily, she did not once look straight into Senpai's eyes.

Senpai stared at Mafuyu's forehead for a long while. She then suddenly turned her body away.

"Let's have a fifteen-minute break to calm down."

And with that, she opened the glass door and stepped into the balcony.

I had no idea what I should be saying, and I couldn't get close to Mafuyu either. All I did was turn down the volume of my bass and place it on the stand, then squat down on top of the small carpet.

"Hey, Mafuyu....."

I lifted my head in surprise when I heard Chiaki speak. At the same time, I saw Mafuyu looking towards the direction of the drums with an expression on her face that was exactly similar to mine.

"You performed much better on the day when you first played together with us, you know?"

Isn't that a little too harsh and direct? But I felt the same way as well, and I believed Mafuyu knew it too.

It was on the sixth of July when the four of us played together for the very first time.





We had yet to achieve the same standards of the song <Kashmir> which I had shown to Ebichiri. How exactly did we manage to hit those standards back then? There was a sudden silence amid the stale hot air in the hall, which caused me unconsciously remember the heat which I had experienced back then.

Mafuyu and I exchanged sight for a brief moment. Even though she lowered her head instantly, I knew she too was reminiscing about the memories of then as well. It's because her eyes were affixed on my bass - a unique bass which I had customized all over again, so as to match the timbre of Mafuyu's guitar.

No. I should say..... that it was not just my strength. Because there's the four of us.

"I know," Mafuyu murmured.

"Then..... why can't we replicate the performance we had back then?"

Chiaki walked to Mafuyu's side and stuck her face close to Mafuyu's so as to stare at her. Mafuyu turned her head away to look out of the window.

"Back then, I wasn't—"

Mafuyu stopped abruptly. Back then, you weren't?

"You weren't— thinking about all these things that are troubling you?"

Chiaki knelt down before Mafuyu, and finished Mafuyu's sentence for her. Upon seeing Mafuyu giving a nod, Chiaki then took a step further.

"You know..... you can just forget about those troublesome things while you're playing with the band!"





Mafuyu did not offer a reply to Chiaki. Instead, she once again shifted her gaze back to her guitar. She swung her hand that was holding on to the pick, and a series semi-quavers flowed out from the high positions, which sounded just like the screeches that are produced when one scratches the surface of a glass - it's the opening of the song <[He Man Woman Hater](#)> by Extreme. Back when I tried lending this CD to Mafuyu, she seemed to be particularly fond of the opening sequence of the song, which had elements of the baroque organ. It was before long that she had practiced it to perfection. The scary thing is, in the original version, the opening of the song is played by utilizing the delays of the dotted notes, as well as the dependence on the effects unit. However, she managed to play out each and every single note by using only her hand. I hugged my knees silently, and immersed myself into the sounds of her guitar that were raining down on me.

Mafuyu's already so incredible by herself—

The reason to be in the band, and the things to worry about - perhaps it is actually me who should be thinking about all these things instead? Is the unstable sound from Mafuyu's guitar because of me being unable to catch up to her?

Suddenly, a series of metallic clashes overlapped the sounds of the guitar. It's Chiaki. Unknown to me, she had already made her way back to the seat at the drums, and was stepping on the pedals of the cymbals in sixteen-beat tempo to match up to Mafuyu. Mafuyu's guitar picked up speed, as though it was trying to break itself free of the tempo.

I picked up my bass once again, and raised its volume as I prepare myself to intervene the duel between the two. However, I couldn't do it. Where exactly should I step in, and using which note? I was clueless.

It was because I could not follow their pace—





I gave a sigh, and placed my bass on the sofa.

The words which Senpai had said sometime ago were reverberating in my ears yet again: You are not following us! Instead, you are our heart. You made it sound real easy, but.....

"Alright, halt!"

Senpai's words came between Mafuyu's guitar and Chiaki's drums forcefully. Even though she wasn't using a mike, her voice managed to cause the two girls to stop their performance due to their shock, and turned their heads over. Senpai was already back in the main hall without us noticing. Next, she removed the T-shirt from her body, and her upper body was wearing only a blue piece of bikini. I reflexively shielded my face with my hands. Is she for real?

"Ah well, let us just start from this song then. Comrade Aihara, please continue on with the sixteen-beat tempo. Young man, what are you waiting for? Hurry up and—"

"Urm, eh? I-I am to change into my swimming wear as well?"

"Hmm? I'm referring to your bass."

Whoa! Damn, that's a really embarrassing misunderstanding. It's your fault for bringing that up earlier!

"I won't be stopping you if you want to change into your swimming wear here."

"I never said that!"







I quickly slipped my arm through the strap of the bass. Chiaki once again began stepping on the pedals. The irritating tempo sounded as though someone had increased the speed of the ticking of the clock, and that caused the atmosphere of the main hall to become tense instantly.

"Comrade Ebisawa, come here for a moment."

Mafuyu was slightly surprised by Senpai's instruction. Senpai was asking Mafuyu to head right to the front of the bass' amplifiers, as she urged Mafuyu with her hands. She then suddenly hugged Mafuyu tightly from behind, who was still carrying her guitar on her back.

"Eh? A-ah!"

Mafuyu twisted her body about as she shrieked. What the hell is Senpai doing? Just as I was about to run towards Mafuyu, Senpai shot a fierce gaze at me with those beast-like eyes of hers, and that caused my legs to ignore my instructions.

Senpai continued to hug Mafuyu by her slender waist tightly with her left arm, with no intention of letting her go.

"Young man, the beats."

Even if she says that, what should I play?

"Anything is fine. We'll go along with you."

I moved my gaze away from Senpai's face, and exchanged sight with Chiaki. Her eyes were telling me, 'Idiot! Hurry up and play!'

I resigned myself and muted my bass. I paced myself to Chiaki's beats, and began





playing the nearly scaleless opening with the dotted rhythms, which sounded just like one punching his fist against the stomach.

"L-let me go!"

Mafuyu's right hand was still tightly grabbed onto by Senpai. She was struggling really hard. Is there really a meaning behind all these things? I continued playing with an uneasy feeling. It was obvious that Chiaki's really fired up though, since her tempo was slowly picking up speed.

"Nope. Listen carefully."

I could hear the calm voice of Senpai amid the beats.

"Music existed way before you were born, and it will continue to exist even after you die. Therefore, you do not have to worry. Just relax and listen. Even if you are no longer playing, you should be able to hear the sounds that you've played earlier on."

Mafuyu stopped struggling.

Just then, I heard it as well - like a surge of electricity, the reverberations of Mafuyu's guitar were wandering between the melody of Chiaki and me.

"Can you hear it?"

For some unknown reason, I could even hear the soft murmurs of Senpai as she whispered from behind Mafuyu's ears. Mafuyu nodded her head with a blushing face.

"Do you want to play?"

I did not catch Mafuyu's reply to Senpai's soft questioning this time round - or at the





very least, I did not know that she had nodded her head in response. The rhythm would not be stable should I not focus my attention onto my hands.

"Mmm, but this is still not enough....." Senpai said teasingly, and with that she took away the pick from Mafuyu's right fingers. "I still can't let you play yet."

Senpai grabbed onto Mafuyu even tighter when she turned her head around. At the same time, the hallucinatory sounds of Mafuyu's guitar were becoming clearer and clearer instead. I released the mute, and allowed the bass to release its clear sounds..... right there! Mafuyu's guitar should be joining in right there. Each and every descending note which I played thereafter were calling out to Mafuyu - it was like they were slowly pumping the blood into her limbs.

"Not yet..... Hold on, we're reaching there soon....."

In response to Senpai's low voice, Mafuyu's sweaty left hand was twiddling the six strings of her guitar. The interweaving noise were sandwiched between Chiaki and I, and the throbbing deepens. It is not time yet? The pair of hands are still not moving yet?

"Right, hold on..... Mmm, let's go..... 2, 3, 4"

Chiaki and I held on to our breaths as an electrifying sound blared out from the amplifiers of the guitar. The remnants of the opening of <He Man Woman Hater> that was in my ears became all clear again, as though the missing pieces were filled up completely.

I raised my head as a chill ran through my body. There's a certain someone in front of the amplifiers — the silhouette of the person with a guitar on her was slowly becoming clearer. The fair fingers were dancing between the six strings. The slightly darker fingers were holding onto a pick and strumming it around the pickup to create





an intense and incredible melody. I knew that Mafuyu's the one who's pressing onto the chords with her left hand, while Senpai who was hugging her from behind was strumming the strings with her right hand. But..... how the hell did they do that? Is that really Mafuyu and Senpai, and not some unknown person whose name I don't even know?

No, I know her. At the same time while I was strumming my bass with my fingertips and constantly sending blood to her body, I realized that I had already knew what her name is — feketerigó.

She's right here—

The pleasant and numbing series of running notes had finally turned into the tapping arpeggios. Senpai's fingers struck the strings hard at the opening rhythm, and Mafuyu's fingers replied with three different notes, which sounded perfectly in place with the elaborate rhythms created by Chiaki and I. While the harmony was gradually changing, a set of triplets leapt past the difference in the pitch of the scales in a single shot, as though it was streaking through the torrential rain. What followed immediately after was another set of incredibly strong triplets that stopped the rhythm.

And then, a moment of silence descended upon the main hall—

"No, mmmm~"

Mafuyu gave a sweet moan, which surprised me. I gathered my senses and took a quick look - Senpai, who was still hugging Mafuyu tightly from behind, had suddenly pulled away Mafuyu's maroon colored long hair, and was softly nibbling on her earlobe. What the heck is she doing!?

"Senpai! Geez—" Chiaki rushed towards them to pry them apart, and had almost





knocked down the drum set in the process. Mafuyu had finally regained her freedom, and the first thing she did was to hide herself behind my back, and stare at Senpai with a teary expression just like that of a cat that had almost drowned.

"I really can't afford to be negligent to you!"

"Sorry sorry. I couldn't hold on any longer, so I accidentally....."

"Accidentally my ass!"

I couldn't help but to retort her as well. What exactly is going through your mind during practice!?

"I mean, there's a delicious-looking pair of ears that is swaying in front of my eyes, yeah? Young man, you should know what I mean!"

"Who knows what you mean!? Don't drag me down along with you!"

"Stupid Senpai! I've told you that you're not allowed to do such things as you please!"

In response to our rage, Senpai replied to us like how a child would when he is throwing a tantrum,

"But, it felt really comfortable just now, you know? Of course, I'm not talking about it in a sexual manner....."

"There's no need to for that strange annotation of yours!"

Mafuyu moaned with a "Uhh—". Seems like she had no intention of leaving my back just yet. I was surprised by her flushed face as well as her teary eyes.





"I'm sorry. Next time, I'll remember to bite Comrade Aihara's ears too. There there, hurry up and return back to your drums."

That sexual harasser. Chiaki returned back to her seat at the drum set rather unwillingly after she was patted on her head. As for Senpai, she just laughed it off and walked back to her guitar.

I could still feel the remains of the throbbing and heat in the surroundings of the hall as well as in me.

So..... I guess that's how it is?

Senpai carried her Les Paul guitar on her shoulders. The instant she lifted the pick in her hand - there was no exchange of words, and there was no need for a countdown. We exchanged sights through the air briefly, and it felt like a jolt of electricity had run through us. The perfectly synchronized playing then began. The heavy beats; the riffs with the sextuplets slipped into it; and also— even though I did not play this song much, the melody of the bass were flowing out of my fingertips naturally. Mafuyu's guitar solo wove out a rainbow bridge from the peak of the our integrated music. Senpai did not use a mike, but the singing voice of <He Man Woman Hater> had definitely made its way vividly into our ears.

I could feel the body warmth on my back. It's Mafuyu. She's right there. Before we knew it, we were no longer separated by a thick door between us. I can finally come into direct contact with her, and somehow it feels like I can even hear the sound of her heartbeat.

It was a real pity that we did not record the ensemble of that day.





Night came rather quickly.

In the end, we didn't go to the beach that day - there was no time to do so, because nearly all of the time was spent on practicing. Even if one of us calls for a rest, Mafuyu would hold on to her guitar without letting it go. She would then wander around the drum set as though she had something to say, and after a while she would begin strumming a rhythmic jam session. Once she starts playing her guitar, Chiaki would join in with her drums, and then practice would start again..... the process repeated all the way till night time.

The night descended, and there was only a single candle placed on the table at the balcony. The candlelight was shining on Mafuyu's face, which was pressing against the neck of the guitar and facing downwards. She's just out from the shower, right? A towel was still hanging on her shoulders, while her wet hair was draped on the towel. A refreshing gust of wind breezed through the comfortable shades of the night.

Is she thinking of something? Mafuyu finally raised her head up when I placed the cup of Oolong tea onto the table.

"There's sugar added in this."

"..... Thank you."

After thanking me with a soft voice, Mafuyu grabbed the cup with a complicated expression on her face and took a sip on it.

"Is it nice to drink it sweet? Wouldn't it taste disgusting with sugar added into the Oolong tea?"

She suddenly raised her head and looked at me with her eyebrows raised.





"Have you drank it before?"

"Nope, never."

"Then don't belittle Oolong tea that has sugar added in it! Try it before coming to a conclusion."

Mafuyu stared at the cup of Oolong tea in my hand. Mine obviously had no sugar in it - I guess this is probably what you mean by a cultural difference? I sat down quietly, and took a gulp of my tea.

After putting the cup down, I allowed the night winds to caress my hot arms and legs as they please. It somehow feels like the asphyxiating sounds were still reverberating in my body.

Can Mafuyu understand my feelings as well? I sneaked a glance sideways. Her face seemed furious, and she suddenly covered my head with the towel from her shoulders.

"..... What's this!?"

"Because you have a really smug expression on your face!" She was angry. "I-It's not your win yet! The victory has not been decided!"

And with that, Mafuyu went back to staring at her own palms again. What a stubborn person she is.....

"Still..... all's good. I feel at ease now," I sighed.

"Why?"





"Because music never lies."

Somehow..... it feels like there will be no problems if we can continue playing this sort of music in the future. Mafuyu kicked me hard on my calves a few times. That hurts! What the heck are you doing!

"Don't be complacent!"

Mafuyu picked up her guitar and turned her body away in a fit of anger. She would probably be angrier if I laughed at this moment, right? Therefore, I placed the cup of Oolong tea to my mouth.

"I'm just not thinking about them when I'm playing the guitar."

"Because you feel really happy when you're playing the guitar?"

She was silent for quite a while with an unhappy expression on her face, before finally giving a slight nod. Isn't that great? I think that should be just about all there is to it.

The glass door was pushed open, and Chiaki walked out of the hall while drying her hair with a towel.

"Right, you guys know where Senpai is?" Chiaki asked after sitting down on the chair next to me. "She asked me to tell her when everyone's done with their baths, but she's not in her room."

She probably went somewhere. Then again, there are only the forest, the beach and the road nearby, so there's not much places that she can go.





"I shall take a bath ahead of her then?"

"You can't! Nao will have to clean up the bathroom as well as wash our clothes, so you'll have to bathe last!"

"Oh yeah....."

..... I accepted her explanation, but..... something feels wrong somewhere? Why are all the jobs thrown at me?

"Where exactly did she go—"

We looked towards the direction of the fence of the balcony, and into the vast and dark forest.

A brushing sound suddenly came from the back of the villa. Chiaki ran to the edge of the balcony and stuck her body out.

"Senpai!"

A silhouette appeared from the darkness - it's Kagurazaka-senpai. She had let down her hair instead of tying it up as usual, and that caused the contours of her silhouette to be blurred. She was grabbing her guitar only by its neck, and allowed the body of the guitar to hang freely below her.

"Where did you go?"

"The beach."

Senpai said softly, and showed a weak smile. The beach? But it's already dark out there?





When I returned to the balcony with Senpai and Chiaki's cup of Oolong tea in my hands, Senpai was already sitting on the chair opposite to where I was sitting in earlier.

"Something happened?"

"Mmm....." Senpai looked into the sky as she pondered on how she continue on with her sentence. "One song's not enough. But at a time like this....."

I sat opposite to Senpai, and saw an empty score placed next to the candle. She's still composing? But we are less than two weeks away from the actual performance.

"Fifty minutes should be a breeze if it's just a jam session, right?" Chiaki said. "Not only is Senpai here, but Mafuyu's around as well. It should be a piece of cake for us to play a song for fifty minutes if we are on a high."

It is definitely possible for Chiaki and Mafuyu to play on and on if there's no one interrupting them.

"All I've done is bringing the score here."

Senpai stretched herself hesitantly.

"I feel like inserting a slow song in the middle. I was thinking that I should be able to come up with something if I soak myself in the sea at night..... But I came up with nothing even after making my way down to the shores."

"That's dangerous! Please don't do that again!"

She's someone who will really jump into the sea with her guitar on her, so that's quite





scary.

"The current me is spoilt for choice."

She said that while staring at the water droplets that were running down the surface of the glass cup. Spoilt for choice?

"The things that we can do now, and the things that we can't..... I want to try all of them. I mean, it's rare for us to get fifty minutes of performance time."

I thought about it for a while. This will be our very first live performance. There's no need for you to go all out for it, right?

"How about we perform the songs from The Eagles? I want to try playing [<Desperado>](#). It should be fine for us to do a cover or two in our performance, right?"

We've always warmed ourselves up with the various songs of The Eagles, but why haven't we played that song before? It's a song that I really liked..... but Senpai shook her head gloomily.

"We won't perform that song."

I was surprised at how straightforward Senpai was in her objection towards my suggestion.

"Why?"

"I can't exactly say why. And it's not like I really liked The Eagles either."

"Urm....." Then..... why are we always practicing on their songs? But I could





somehow understand a little after Senpai had said that. Senpai's preference is skewed towards the hard rock of the early days, where the guitar and the bass play together in unison. In contrast, The Eagles is a band that composes melodies that are easy to the ears, and their songs have a mature air around them. The rock band that had released award-winning singles one after another is kind of an extreme counter-example of what she likes.

"What sort of song is that?" Mafuyu, who was sitting next to me, asked.

"Well....."

I am certain that the song is in the iPod that I brought here..... but I swallowed back the words that were about to come out of my mouth. The opening of the song is played by a piano. Somehow, it doesn't feel like it is a good idea to let Mafuyu listen to that song.

I borrowed the guitar from Mafuyu, and tried my hardest to recall the fingering that I was not too familiar with. I began playing <Desperado>. The cheers followed right after the end of the melody of the opening.

Desperado. Why didn't I notice it sooner?

You been out ridin' fences for so long now—

A hand suddenly stretched out in the direction and grabbed hold of the neck of the guitar together with my left hand. That shocked me. I shut my mouth, lifted my head up, and saw Senpai right before me. She had stretched herself out over the table from the opposite side to stop me from playing on any further.

"..... Senpai?"





I could not even speak from my shock - instead, Chiaki was the one who gave a tiny whimper in my stead. I could not pry my gaze away from Senpai's eyes. It was as though the darkness in her pair of eyes were swallowing me up.

What's..... going on?

"Ah, nothing. Sorry."

Senpai forced a smile, and released her hand. I am certain that her smile was a facade.

"I really..... don't wanna hear that. But it's not because young man's bad at singing, nor was it because you're playing the guitar badly."

"But he did play the guitar badly."

Mafuyu mumbled. Sorry for that! Forget it, I won't play anymore. With me suffering a blow to my self-esteem, I pushed the Stratocaster back into Mafuyu's hands.

Senpai stood up. Her long hair spread out behind her back.

"I'll be back after a shower. Young man, it's about time you decide on who you'll be sleeping together with."

"I already said that I'll be sleeping on the sofa below!"

Senpai laughed and waved her hand gently, before disappearing into the other side of the glass door. Geez.....

What was going on with Senpai just now?

For a moment, her eyes— there seemed to be a hint of loneliness in them.





I cleaned up the bathroom after I was done with the shower. As for the clothes that I should be washing— hold on a second, are that group of girls actually expecting me to wash their swimsuits as well? Please consider for a moment that I am a guy here, yeah!?

After I was done with the chores, I returned to the hall. Aside from the guitar stands as well as the amplifiers and stuff, there was no one to be seen in the hall. The air felt slightly cold. Even though it's summer, the temperature at night has dropped down considerably.

Speaking of which, I am to sleep on the sofa, but there's neither pillows nor blankets here. I'll probably catch a cold if I fall asleep like that. There should be spare blankets in the bedrooms, right?

I was a little troubled when I made my way up to the second floor - I had no idea who's staying in which room. Ah, whatever. I'm just here to borrow some blankets anyway.

I knocked on the door closest to the stairs.

"..... It's not locked."

Came a weak-sounding voice. Mmm, it's Mafuyu huh? I was strangely nervous when I opened the door.

"W-Why are you here?"

Looks like she was nervous as well. Mafuyu's sitting on her bed in her green pajamas.





The room's all dark. She had curled herself up while hugging onto the pillow, and was staring towards my direction.

"Urm..... is there any spare blankets around? I want to borrow one from you."

Mafuyu nodded her head and pointed towards the door to the storage space. She then shifted her eyes back to the screen of the handphone which she was holding in her hands..... Hmm?

"You brought your handphone here?"

I remembered her saying that she didn't when I asked her earlier on.

"Papa wants me to bring it along. But I don't really know how to use it."

"Ah, I see." That's something to be expected from Ebichiri, who dotes on his daughter a little too much.

"And I don't really know how to store phone numbers....."

"Wait for me for a while."

I walked down the stairs to get my handphone. I then keyed in the number that Mafuyu told me, and made a call to it. The predefined ringtone rang from the handphone in Mafuyu's hand.

"Y-Ya!"

Mafuyu almost dropped her phone down in panic, though I managed to catch it before it hit the ground. My phone number was appearing on the LCD screen of the phone.





"..... Shall I help you store this number?"

"Mmm."

Just as I was exchanging our numbers and teaching her how to store it in her phone, a heavy-sounding orchestra ringtone rang again on Mafuyu's phone.

"..... It's from Papa," Mafuyu pouted.

What piece is that..... Gluck's opera? It's the aria sung by the character Agamemnon in <[Iphigénie en Aulide](#)> — *Ah, my lovely daughter*. Looks like Ebichiri had already stored his number in her handphone and set the customized ringtone for it. I have never seen a father who dotes on his own daughter as much as he does.

"..... Hello?"

"Mafuyu? Is that Mafuyu? You're still awake? There's a time difference of fourteen hours..... Isn't it twelve midnight over there already!?"

Mafuyu took the phone call by placing her handphone next to her ears, and Ebichiri's voice came out through the speakers right after that. He was so loud that even I could hear him. Damn, you're noisy. Since you know it's midnight here, cut down your volume already. Mafuyu knitted her brows, and tossed the handphone onto the other side of her bed.

"I'm about to go to sleep."

She said softly towards the phone, which had rolled its way to the end of the bed.

"Are your fingers alright? Did you apply ice-compress on them? You didn't go down





to the beach and play in the water, right? The sea breeze is bad for your skin and your hair, so you'll have to—"

How can they converse with the phone so far away from her?

"Mmm, I'm fine."

"Don't even think of not covering yourself with a blanket when you sleep, just because it's summer. How's the place you're staying at? Do they have beds there? You guys aren't sleeping together with mattresses laid on the floor, right? I-It can't be that you're sharing a room with Hikawa's son, right?"

Mafuyu answered him with an irritated expression on her face,

"Mmm, he's currently right next to me."

Ebichiri's voice from the other side of the phone had become strange, turning into something like the sounds of a lion gritting its teeth. Therefore, Mafuyu tossed her pillow to knock off the phone to the bed below. She then swiftly proceeded to cut off its power, though it looked more like she was about to stomp on it with her foot. The bedroom then fell into silence yet again.

"..... It'll be really troublesome later on, right?"

"Who cares. I don't really care what that person thinks."

Seems like there's still quite some distance to go before the Ebisawa father and daughter can reconcile together.

"But how can he hear you, despite you being that far away from the phone?"





"Papa specially ordered this custom-made phone for me. He says it will be dangerous for my two hands to be tied down when I'm using the phone. Therefore, he wants the phone to be usable even when I am hanging it on my neck or by placing it on the table."

Ah, I see. Mafuyu can only use her left hand to carry the phone, since her right fingers are immobile. With that, both of her hands will not be free when she's using the phone. But to include microphones with that sort of performance just for that reason alone..... isn't that a little too exaggerating?

"I think there's also all sorts of secondary functions as well. Like the ability to retaliate against molesters."

Rather than pitying Ebichiri, I think it's Mafuyu who deserves them more - it is a real pain to have that sort of parents. Now's not the time for me to be talking about others though - this time, it's my handphone that's ringing. I took a glance at the screen, and wondered briefly if I should just ignore the call. However, things may become even more troublesome if I don't, so I chose to pick it up instead.

"..... What?"

"Eh? Ah, nothing. I've heated the bathing water myself, and am even done with brushing my teeth. I just want Nao to praise me a little."

Upon hearing the strangely happy voice of Tetsurou, my mood took a plunge all the way down to the bottom.

"Fine, go to sleep already."

"But it feels so empty to sleep by myself. At least say 'good night' to me or something!"





And so I switched off my handphone as well. I was irritated to the point where I had no idea what I should be saying next.

Mafuyu let out a giggle while sitting on the bed next to me. She had finally showed a laughter on her face. Seems like Tetsurou's idiocy is not totally bad after all.

Is now the right time for me to talk to her about it? About the things Ebichiri told me, as well as the things about the piano.....

"What?"

Noticing my gaze, Mafuyu returned to her serious expressions. I quickly shifted my eyes away. How should I start?

Just then, a series of footsteps came from outside the door. The doorknob was twisted opened. I stood up in surprise, and the door was suddenly flung open.

In the next instant, a patch of whiteness suddenly obscured my sight - an impact landed on my face right after, which caused me to fall backwards.

"Sneak attack successful— eh? What's Nao doing in Mafuyu's room?"

Chiaki's question landed on us. I sat myself up, and took a look at the thing that fell onto my stomach. I finally realized that the thing that was flying at me was a pillow.

"..... W-What's going on?"

Mafuyu's uneasy voice came from behind me.

"What else? A pillow fight, of course! It's the night of the training camp right now.





"Are you really going to sleep now?"

"Night's the time for us to sleep."

"Too naive! Hey Nao, move away!" Chiaki was wearing a set of loose-fitting pajamas. She stepped past my body in order to pick up the pillow. She then used the daijodan techniques of the Judo, and began her assault on Mafuyu by swinging the pillow downwards from over her head. Please, I beg you, quieten down a little! Just then, Chiaki suddenly turned her body to face the back, and knocked down an incoming pillow with her arm.

"As expected from a Judo expert. It's like there's eyes on the back of your head."

Senpai, who was standing next to the door, was putting on a fearless smile on her face. I was strangely tired all of a sudden, and the only thing that's going through my head were things like, 'So Senpai's pajamas are blue huh'.

"Senpai, you're really despicable to sneak an attack on me like that!"

Look who's talking. Didn't you do the same to me?

"Right, so that means that young man has already decided to sleep together with Comrade Ebisawa?"

"T-That's not....." "Not at all!"

Mafuyu and I objected at the same time, but we didn't continue on after that. That's because Chiaki had picked up the pillow once again and slammed it onto my face at full force. "Geez! Stupid Nao!"

And with that, Senpai came into the bedroom as well, which marks the official start





of the pillow fight. All Mafuyu did was hide herself on the other side of her bed - the only things she did was defend herself and retaliate by throwing the pillows back in the direction it came from. She's quite accurate with her throws — though most her throws were directed at me.





Chapter 6

So As Not To Wake Up From the Dream



Hmm, really?





I woke up from the sounds of the piano.

I could clearly see the grains of the tall wooden ceiling. For a brief moment, I wasn't sure where I was. I tried to sit up, but I nearly fell off the sofa instead. The blanket's were on the floor - perhaps I kicked them off me because of the heat?

Hmm? The pillow fight..... till what time did we stop playing? My memory was a blur as I was exhausted back then. I didn't even remember making my way back to the hall to sleep.

I sat up on the sofa. With my views going all the way to the other side of the hall, I could see the back of someone together with her long black hair, sitting in front of the piano. It's Kagurazaka-senpai. She was using her slender fingers to tap on the keys of the piano as lightly as she could, as though she was trying to write on the surface of the water. Her singing voice that was overlapping the sounds of the piano sounded much more tender than usual.

I fixed my sight on her long hair that was swaying to the rhythm of the song, and that went on till the song was over.

"..... Morning! You were sleeping really soundly. Are you that exhausted?"

Once she was done with the song, Senpai stood up from her chair and turned around to look at me.

"The look of your sleeping face is just too cute. I was deliberating between punching or kissing you awake. In the end, I chose to wake you up with my singing instead."

Why weren't there options that were much more normal?

"Senpai, you know how to play the piano too?"





"Me? Well, not really."

Senpai closed the lid of the keyboard quietly, before proceeding to walk in my direction and sat down on the sofa next to me.

"How's it?"

"How's what?"

"You've been listening this whole time, right?"

"..... A new song? The one you mentioned yesterday."

Senpai nodded. I raised my leg up on the sofa, and swallowed the words that I was about to say. How should I go about saying this?

"Somehow, it feels like..... it's overly done?"

"Hmm?"

"The tune is beautiful, but it sounds just like the school-anthem of some middle-school. We'll just bore our audience if we perform that on stage."

Senpai laughed heartily.

"Those are some interesting words you're using there, young man..... but I get what you mean. This song won't do." Senpai leaned herself against the sofa and looked upwards. "How stupid of me to be thinking about such things right now. I was thinking..... that the piece would be better if Comrade Ebisawa was the one who is playing the piano."





"Well....."

It's..... probably me thinking too much into things? But I don't think that the piano should be used in that song.

"Hey, young man. I think I've managed to gather the best members in the band. But that makes me spoilt for choice, and I'm slowly unable to find my own music. What irony. It feels so painful - just because I am no longer alone; just because there are people around me who can do the things that I cannot do."

What's happening? Why is she saying all of this all of the sudden?

"Senpai, you've been acting strange since yesterday."

"Hmm, really?"

Senpai gave her usual laugh, though it seems a little forced.

"Don't you worry! I'm really happy to be able to have a training camp with you guys!"

Senpai then stood up and said with an exceptionally cheerful voice,

"Young man, I'm hungry. Comrade Aihara should be back from her jog soon, so hurry up and start preparing our breakfast! I'll go wake Comrade Ebisawa with a morning kiss."

Just as I was about to block Senpai from making her way towards the stairs, the door of the room on the second floor opened. Mafuyu walked out in her pajamas while rubbing her sleepy-looking eyes. That was close.





"We must have onigiri at the beach today!"

Chiaki said that immediately once we were done with the practice in the morning. Yes yes yes, I get it.

"I knew you'd say that, so I'm already done cooking the rice. I've filled the flasks with tea as well."

"Wow, that's impressive of you, Nao. Do you have telepathy or something? How did you know that I wanted to go to the beach for our lunch?"

"Can't be more obvious from looking at you. You've already inflated the swimming tubes, right."

"Young man, prepare more omelettes. The dishes that you make with eggs are really something!"

As she said that, she began to take out the beach equipment from the storeroom, which includes a foldable deck chair. These girls are really hyped about playing huh..... didn't you say that a single song is not enough?

"We have to play when it is time for us to play! It's not like the inspiration will come to me if I lock myself up in a room and cry!"

While I was preparing the rice in the kitchen, I heard the footsteps of two people walking up the stairs. Before long, I could hear them making their way back down.

"Nao, look here!" A voice called out to me from my back.





I stuck my head out to look into the hall, and what appeared before me was the scene of Chiaki and Senpai in their swimsuits. Uwaa! Though I had seen them in half of that attire yesterday, the impact of seeing them in their full set is just way different than before.

Chiaki's swimsuit had a sarong by her waist, which looked a little childish. She was holding onto a gigantic swimming tube as well as an inflatable killer-whale doll in her hands. And since she was standing next to Senpai, whose figure rivals that of a model, the result was an incredibly clear..... urm, contrast between the two of them (in many different aspects). Moreover, I could see the drum set, the huge Marshall amplifiers and etc behind them - the whole scene just seems surreal.

"Hey, snap out of your daze! Don't you have any feelings about this?"

"Well..... how about you girls wear this on stage during our actual performances?"

"Senpai, that's what he said?"

"Mmm, we can consider it." Don't take that seriously!

Chiaki turned her head around to look at Mafuyu, who was sitting on the sofa and tuning her guitar. "Mafuyu, hurry up and change too." Mafuyu shook her head.

"Let's practice instead."

Since the ensemble we had yesterday, Mafuyu had turned into a practicing fanatic. It's the same for today as well - she refused to let go of her guitar ever since we had finished our breakfast. She seemed to be in a bad mood as usual, but I think that's because she could not practice despite her really wanting to. There's nothing bad with that though.





"Moreover, I can't swim."

"But you bought a swimsuit!"

Chiaki stepped up her attack against the cowering Mafuyu.

"Geez, Mafuyu is never united with the band!"

Mafuyu seemed like she was shocked. She looked at Chiaki, Senpai and me.

There's no need for you to put it so harshly — Mafuyu suddenly stood up as I was thinking that.

"..... I understand. I'll be back after changing."

She then made her way up the stairs and into her room.

"Nao, you go change too."

Chiaki kicked me in my back.

"Eh? Me too?" I don't particularly enjoy swimming.

"But of course! Why else do you think we came to the beach for?"

Senpai followed up with, "You're a guy anyway, so it's fine for you to join us in just your underwear."

"N-No way! I get it, you guys just make your way there first. I'll send the onigiri over later."





It's really easy for the guys to change into their swimming wear, and we don't have to apply those troublesome stuff on our skin either.

Due to that, Mafuyu was not out of her room even after I was done with kneading the onigiri and wrapping up the omelettes with the aluminium foil. She probably requires more time to change due to her right hand? There's a girl changing on the second floor while I'm preparing the food - somehow, the whole situation feels a little strange.

It seems awkward to wait for Mafuyu to be done with changing, so I yelled towards the second floor, "I'll make a move first!" I then put on a sweatshirt and made my way to the beach.

Mafuyu arrived a while later. After seeing her violet colored swimsuit that's beneath her hoodie, I finally understood the reason behind Chiaki's persistence. Both swimsuits are the same style. The only difference is the colors.

"Nao, take a photo for us!"

Chiaki ran to Mafuyu excitedly.

"Young man, what should I do? I'm facing a problem here."

Senpai was lying next to me beneath the parasol. She said that to me with a sweet voice after taking a look at Mafuyu, and then at Chiaki.

"What's wrong?"





"The two of them are just too beautiful. What a headache."

How do you expect me to answer that!? Just sleep quietly!

We laid our mat on a small sandy area between the boulders, and sat down to have our lunch. Due to the small space, I could easily see Mafuyu's fair skin at a very close distance. And then there's Chiaki's tanned skin, as well as Senpai's— urm..... in any case, I was the only one who ate lunch while facing the cliffs. However, they had no intention of letting me off easily.

"Nao, I want to eat the dried plums, so help me peel them."

"Peel them yourself!"

"Young man, I've spilled tea on my swimsuit. Can you help me wipe it off?"

"Wipe it yourself!"

"Naomi, help me to wrap the seaweed."

"Wrap—" No wait, Mafuyu can't do that by herself, right? Since she had only one movable hand. I did it like how the convenience stores do when I was preparing the onigiri - by packing the seaweed separately from the rice. I should have just wrapped the seaweed onto them if I had thought of this earlier.

"Nao, you spoil Mafuyu too much! You have to let her do things like these by herself."

Didn't you ask me to do everything as well!?

"And so I'll be eating this—" "You can't!"





Chiaki and Mafuyu pounced towards the wrapped onigiri in my hand at the same time, which resulted in them crashing into me and crushing me at the very bottom. Hey! We're touching each other at a lot of places, and it hurts!!! Just as I was struggling hard beneath Chiaki's tummy, Senpai took the onigiri off me and ate it.

"A peaceful resolution. Can I sit on the very top?"

"Please stop. I'll be squashed to death."

I crawled my way out from beneath Mafuyu and Chiaki's bodies and immediately distanced myself from all of them to take a breather.

I don't remember Chiaki's chest being that well-developed, so when did they— no wait, what the heck am I thinking here!? Calm down. Deep breaths. I took a look at them while squatting down, and found Chiaki and Mafuyu staring at each other. Once again, the view of both of them in their swimsuits came into my eyes, and for a long while I couldn't make my way back to the mat.

We were all sweaty from our lunch, so Chiaki pulled Mafuyu to the beach right after they were done with it. While putting on an unwilling expression on her face, Mafuyu said, "But I said I couldn't swim!"

"I told you it's okay! Just hold onto Torajirou!" Chiaki said as she patted the giant inflatable killer-whale doll hard. So you even gave it a name huh.....

"B-But..... what if I fall off from it?"

"Nao and I will be there beside you. Isn't that right?" Eh, I'll have to follow along?

"Uh—....."





"Geez, are you trying to disrupt the unity of the band again?"

Mafuyu finally nodded her head rather unwillingly. Seems like we can get her to do whatever we want as long as we mention the unity of the band.

Mafuyu's hoodie was already pulled away from her by Chiaki. She grabbed tightly onto the killer-whale Torajirou, and a frightened expression appeared on her face the moment the tip of her toes came into contact with the sea.

Chiaki said exasperatedly, "It will be even more dangerous should you continue to bend your legs like this. You'll fall off!"

"But I'll get wet....."

"We're at the sea, so we'll definitely get wet!"

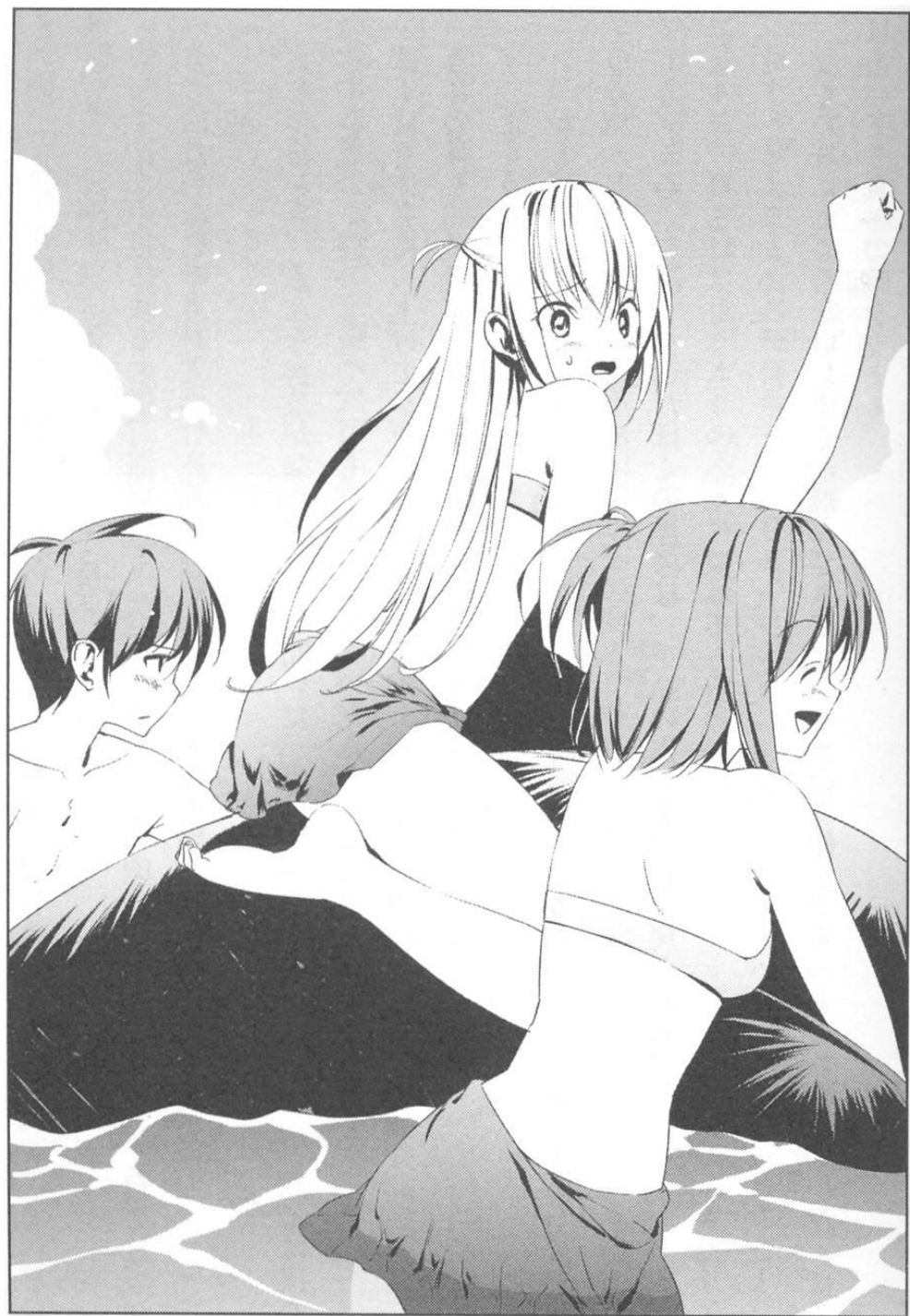
"Ah, w-wait!"

Chiaki pushed Torajirou into the sea without hesitation.

"Nao too. Quick."

I went into the water quickly and swam up to the left of Torajirou to help maintain it's balance. I accidentally touched Mafuyu's thighs just once - I retracted my hands quickly in shock, and had nearly drowned while doing so. Mafuyu's smooth legs and her incredibly slender waist were so close I could reach out to them. I dared not face her at all, so the only thing I could do was keep staring at the nose of the killer-whale doll. I could feel my heart thumping in the cool waters of the sea.







Mafuyu shut her eyes while grabbing the killer-whale doll tightly. She even trembled for quite a while, before finally giving up with the struggling and placed her legs down. The sea is not shallow, and the waters were already at my shoulders despite being only a slight distance away from the beach. Due to me wearing a pair of beach slippers, I could occasionally feel the sharp edges of the rocks beneath me.

"It's so cold....." Mafuyu mumbled.

"But it feels comfortable, right?"

Chiaki, who was on the other side of the killer-whale doll, said.

Mafuyu opened her eyes timidly. As Chiaki had been swimming forward non-stop, we were already of a considerable distance away from the beach. At that position, we could see the contours of the wave breakers that were created by stacking the wave-dissipating blocks together. A bunch of cumulonimbus clouds were gradually gathering right above it. The waves were constantly pushing us back to the shores, but we went against the currents and swam further outwards.

What appeared before our eyes were a stretch of deep blue color, a stretch of sky-blue color, as well as white that was overflowing from the intersection of the two at the horizon. It felt like my limbs had dissolved into the cool waters of the sea - the only thing that proved my existence was my heartbeat.

"..... It's beautiful."

Those words leaked out from between Mafuyu's lips. Ever since we hit the waters, Mafuyu had been grabbing onto my right arm tightly. I could feel that the trembling of her hand was gradually dying down.

I lifted myself up to sit on the left fin of the killer-whale doll, and scanned the





surface of the sea.

The sea that stretches endlessly outwards are of the same color as those of Mafuyu's eyes.

How I wish that time would just stop like this.

Should the skies continue to be as clear as then forever, Mafuyu and I will probably be able to swim to anywhere we want.

However, my slowly drifting thoughts were pulled back to reality by Chiaki's voice.

"And next, we'll have to get Mafuyu used to coming into contact with the waters."

"Eh? Kya—"

There was a violent shake to the inflated doll, and a splash of cold water flew into my ears. I quickly grabbed hold of Mafuyu's arms to support her.

"S-Stop!"

"It's fine, it's just the sea water!"

Chiaki began splashing the waters onto Mafuyu's body. From the sound of her voice, she seemed to be really happy. Mafuyu kept moving about in an attempt to avoid the attacks from Chiaki, and that caused me to waste a lot of effort in maintaining the balance of the killer-whale doll. Though this time round, Mafuyu did retaliate against Chiaki as well.

After having her fun in bullying Mafuyu, Chiaki said from the other side of the killer-whale doll,





"It's about time for us to head back?"

"I want to go back as soon as possible." Mafuyu's voice sounded like she was close to tears.

"Nao and I will be swimming back first. Do your best with Torajirou!"

"Y-You can't!"

With her face going pale, Mafuyu grabbed me tightly by my arm, so much that her fingernails were digging into the back of my hand.

Even after we had our fun at the beach, the summer sun was still shining high above the skies. When we were all done with our showers, Senpai instructed us to "take a little rest" before locking herself up in her room. I saw her taking her guitar along with her, so she's probably trying to come up with a new song?

As the food stocks were about to be finished, I decided to go out to do some shopping.

Just as I was walking back to the villa while carrying the plastic bags in my hand, I could hear the sound of the piano coming from the inside.

Piano?

After walking past the forest, I could see the hall through the balcony. Sitting on the piano seat was a person with maroon colored long hair, who was swaying herself slowly to the gentle tempo of the accompaniment.





Perhaps it was because she heard the sounds of my footsteps - Mafuyu closed the lids of the keyboard and stood up. Her ears are as sharp as ever.

What song was she playing.....?

When I opened the door and entered the main hall, Mafuyu was shaking her head hard despite me not asking her anything.

"Y-You heard wrong. There's nothing at all."

I took a glance around the hall. Chiaki's sleeping on the sofa with her body curled up. I guess she must be dead tired after the morning jog, the practice and the swim. After seeing how bad her sleeping posture was (she was about to fall head first onto the floor), I positioned her back onto the sofa, and covered her tummy with a piece of blanket. Regardless of how hot summer is, you shouldn't be sleeping with your navel revealed.

"Senpai..... is she still upstairs?" I asked Mafuyu while placing the stuff I had bought into the fridge.

"I didn't hear the sounds of the guitar, so she might be asleep."

I see, sounds like a good idea to go for a quick nap. Ah, no wait - this may be the only chance for me to speak with Mafuyu alone, since Chiaki had disrupted us yesterday by barging into her room.

After walking back into the hall from the kitchen, Mafuyu was already out at the balcony. She was replaying the tune she had played on the piano earlier by using her Stratocaster guitar, though it was not connected to the amplifiers. I took my bass and walked out of the glass door as well.





"This is Senpai's composition, right?"

Mafuyu nodded.

"This is the first time that the band's writing a song about love, so we probably don't have much concepts about it. How should we go about composing the song?"

"I don't know why, but somehow, it feels like all the songs that Kyouko has written aren't compatible with her own voice at all."

I looked at Mafuyu's face in surprise.

"..... What?" Mafuyu tilted her head with a confused expression on her face.

Since when did she start..... addressing Senpai directly by her name? And that means..... no, I don't think that's the case.

"You were talking about them being incompatible..... What does that mean?"

"I think....."

Mafuyu looked into the direction of the second floor as she speaks.

"Whenever she's composing the songs, Kyouko must have been composing them with a male singer in her mind."

"That's....."

Upon hearing Mafuyu say that, I think it may actually be true. Senpai will deliberately lower her vocal range whenever she sings - but I didn't pay any





particular attention to it, as I thought that is how she had been singing this whole time.

"And so..... she could no longer conceal that with her voice if the song is slow."

I gave a "Oh—", and couldn't help but stare at Mafuyu's face for a long time. Thinking about it deeper, this girl has been growing up in the world of music ever since she was born - perhaps that's the reason for her to notice these minute details that quickly?

However, Mafuyu didn't go on any further with that. It's my turn to take over. In order to prevent the quiet song from being destroyed, I'll have to support Senpai's voice. But how should I go about doing it?

I could not come up with any idea despite me hugging onto my bass for a while. I was suddenly thrown into an illusion where the dust were piling on my shoulders, and thus making me unable to move.

"But I think the piano will make things even worse."

I raised my head in hesitation when I heard Mafuyu say that.

"..... You heard..... the song in the morning?"

"Were you the one who was playing the song this morning?"

"Nope, that was Senpai."

"I see."

Mafuyu placed her immobile right hand onto the desk. Despite being someone who





easily shows her emotions through her face whenever she is angry or close to tears, I could not read the expressions that was on Mafuyu's face at the moment.

"Mafuyu, don't you..... hate it?"

I tried asking her. Mafuyu turned her head to face me.

"Hate what?"

"The piano. You were playing on it just now, right?"

"I've already decided not to think about those things anymore."

Which means she had been thinking about such things till not too long ago. I mean, she didn't even choose music as her elective.

"Moreover, there's proofs of me playing the piano all over the world. There is no point of me shutting my ears and ignoring it myself."

"That's quite a unique way of looking at things....."

"Because Papa will definitely play my CD when he's at home. I won't be able to hold on if I don't think that way."

Ebichiri..... that's just too much! That's why your daughter hates you!

"If so, then....." I choose my words carefully. "If your fingers can move again—"

I paused halfway into my question to take a quick peek at Mafuyu's expressions. She's not angry. Probably.





"— Will you play it again?"

"Did Papa request you to ask me that?"

"Ugh!" I made a weird sound by accident. Shit, I've been found out!

"Papa said he went to your house, and he says that you're much more decent that he had originally thought."

So Ebichiri's the one who told her that! But then..... there's nothing wrong about that either. I mean, he must have told her the reason for the sudden approval of her joining the training camp. Urm, what to do? There's no point in hiding it with the way things have developed, right?

"Mmm, something like that. But that's not all there is to it....."

I too wish to listen to Mafuyu play the piano once more. I had already said that before, but she didn't give me any response to that. What should I say for now?

"Do you want to listen to me playing the piano again?"

Mafuyu actually took the initiative and asked that question, which surprised me a lot. I was stunned speechless for a moment, before finally answering with a silent nod.

"But..... You've already listened to all of my CDs, right?"

"That's not the point, is it? They didn't record the pieces that I like."

"For example?"

"Things like Beethoven's <Les Adieux> sonata. You've said in an interview that you





like that piece, right? I too want to listen to the complete recording in full clarity! The sound quality of the tape which you sent me earlier is no good at all. Then there's <[Waldstein](#)> - even though I don't like it that much, it just feels like something's missing if you don't record that in a CD. As for <[Appassionata](#)>, you'll have to play it properly too! Felix Mendelssohn..... you'll have to at least record the whole of his <[Lieder ohne Worte](#)> series. And aside from all that, I hope that you can do recordings on the fugue techniques for the piano— Urm, wait..... that's not the point!"

Without me knowing, I had rattled on and on about my own feelings, and was even laughed at by Mafuyu. Geez, I can't go on any further if you do that. I shut my mouth unhappily, and allowed my gaze to fall onto my bass.

"..... But, I'm not in the band to play the piano, right? Because I am the guitarist here."

Mafuyu murmured.

"Eh? Ah, no....."

"So let's not talk about that for now. Because I don't really know about it myself."

Somehow, it felt like Mafuyu had misunderstood something. Should we compose a song in the future that needs the accompaniment of the piano, and should Mafuyu's fingers be completely healed by then, wouldn't it be natural for me to want Mafuyu to play the piano for that? No wait, you can't really put it like that.....

The problem does not lie in the fact if she's a guitarist or a pianist—

I tried asking her once again, "Well..... have you solved your problems in regards to the band?"





"Eh?"

"You should have understood..... your reason for joining the band, right?"

That was the promise between Mafuyu and me. However, she shook her head instead.

"Haven't you figured it out yet? We were that....."

"It's you.....!" Mafuyu suddenly interrupted my words loudly. "It's because you don't understand!"

I was stunned.

"You said..... that I don't understand?"

"You don't understand me."

Mafuyu stared at me with some tears in her eyes. Of course, I had never understood her that well, even till now. "But..... that has nothing to do with what we are discussing, right?"

Mafuyu suddenly turned her head away to face the forests. Therefore, I could only ask her that question by half-swallowing it back into my mouth.

"Then what's your reason for joining the band?"

"..... Why huh? It's because Chiaki and Senpai invited me to join."

"I don't mean it that way."





If you don't mean it that way, then what other reason is there for me to join the band? To play the bass? So as to pump the blood into the hands and the legs? Is that really all there is to it? Why does it have to be Mafuyu? Why does it have to be me? There should be a deeper reason to that—

That's right. I shouldn't be here just for the sake of playing the musical instruments. If there is any reason that I have to be in the band despite the huge difference in my skills when compared to those of the other members, then it will be because I can see things that Senpai would have missed from her perspective. The things that she will not realize if she does not feel it with her heart - the sounds that she will not be able to imagine if she does not hold the bass in her hands.

"..... Ah!"

Just then, a song suddenly appeared in my mind.

I could almost hear the final product produced by weaving our music with Senpai's singing voice. I picked up my bass once again. And because of that, I left my words hanging halfway.

At then, I had planned to say something important - something really important to Mafuyu. I should have said it back then. If I did, then perhaps we would not have passed by each other.

However, the me back then was already engulfed by music. I tried replaying the sounds in my head, and strummed the strings with my fingers. Can I materialize it? I won't know without recording it and listening to it. We have a recorder around, but Senpai and Chiaki were sleeping. Moreover, it will be really embarrassing if I fail, so I'd prefer to try it out alone.

"What's going on?"





Mafuyu asked me suddenly. She probably found it strange for me to be in a sudden fluster.

"Mmm..... I want to try something. If possible, I hope I can do some recording by myself, but I'll be disturbing the two of them."

Mafuyu looked at me with her pair of moist eyes. Back then, I really should have noticed the slight feelings of blame and dependence towards me from the expressions of her eyes. Instead, Mafuyu stood up from her chair and pushed open the glass door. I could hear her walking up and down the stairs. Before I knew it, she had returned to the balcony.

"Use this."

Mafuyu took out a recorder which was placed in a torn and tattered synthetic black leather box. That's the precious item of Mafuyu which her mother had left for her - and which I had helped her to repair.

"..... Can I really borrow this from you?"

"The recordings may not be crystal clear, but it has a big recording range."

Since it's just a trial recording, it should be more than enough. The recorder's still not spoilt yet. Seems like Mafuyu has been using it really carefully, and that made me a little happy.

I placed the bass back into its case. I then stuff the mini-amplifiers and the recorder into the pockets of the case, and made my way over the fence of the balcony.

"Where are you going?" Mafuyu sounded like she was close to tears.





"Eh? Urm..... to a place where I won't disturb anyone even if I sing."

"T-Then I too shall—"

Urm, you can't. What will happen if the trial ends up as a failure? It'll be really embarrassing!

"Since both of them are still asleep, you should just stay here instead."

Mafuyu became visibly depressed, but I really had no idea why. I walked away from the villa, went past the cries of the cicadas, and made my way towards the beach.

I returned to the villa when the sun was about to set. The door opened just as I was about to reach out for the doorknob. Chiaki stuck her head out of the door, and said with an expression as though she was about to pounce onto me,

"Nao, you're back? Geez, where did you go? I'm hungry!"

Chiaki pulled me into the villa energetically. I could see Mafuyu sitting down on the sofa wearily while hugging her guitar.

"Is Senpai still holed up in her room?"

"Mmm, so the two of us could only practice by ourselves. Hey, Mafuyu, let's start!"

Chiaki sat down between the drum set again, and gently twirled her drum sticks. Mafuyu seems dead tired from all the playing - she tried to stand up wobbly, and instead she could only took a seat on the sofa weakly. Go take a rest if you're that





tired.

However, just as I was entering the kitchen to prepare to stew some vegetables, Chiaki began to play the drums by herself. It's the hi-hat playing a set of semi-quavers, which sounded just like the buzz of a mosquito. I already knew what the song was just from that short section alone. Mafuyu should have realized it in an instant, right? Coming shortly after the beats was the guitar solo, which sounded as though someone was running barefooted downhill on a mountain of spikes.

It's <He Man Woman Hater>. A chill ran through my spine, causing goosebumps to appear on my skin.

What a miracle that was - all Chiaki needed was four bars of her drumming to convey her thoughts to Mafuyu. That power forms the basis of the jam sessions of this band.

Mafuyu and Chiaki's performance went on endlessly like a kaleidoscope. It suddenly felt like they had added in the overture of <The Marriage of Figaro>. And as the melody spiraled its way up to the peak, Chiaki brought in <[Paradise City](#)> by Guns N' Roses.

I gently touched Mafuyu's recorder that was placed on top of the fridge.

Mafuyu's alright already. I should be the one who's worried about my reason to be in the band instead. I probably won't be able to do much during the performance, right? If so, I will have to do the things that I can do.

I've recorded it multiple times, and listened through it many times as well. I don't really know if it will be successful though. I was really not too confident of myself.





After our dinner, Chiaki said she wanted to play with the fireworks. She had even prepared those fireworks that you fire off from the ground - that girl is really meticulous only when it comes to stuff like this.

"Don't place those fireworks on your hands."

Chiaki immediately gave a retort right after I had said that,

"But it's more interesting this way!"

"You've caused a small fire by playing them this way back when you were in elementary school!"

This is a villa that we've loaned from someone, so what should we do if something happens?

Mafuyu was almost in tears from her shock because of the spinning firecrackers. Chiaki stuck the sparklers together into an unbelievably thick bunch. It's already late into the night when we were done with all the fireworks.

Yet again, I was supposed to be the last to shower. And after I was done with the clothes washing, I still have to make my way back to the place to clear the rubbish created during the fireworks session. A thick smell of gunpowder lingered in the air in front of the balcony. It's a smell that will appear only on the nights of summer, but I do quite like that smell sometimes.

In the end, I had no chance to show Senpai the recording that I had done, and the recorder was in my pocket this whole time. Damn, it's all Chiaki's fault!

Just as I was scanning through the bushes to see if there were any remains of the





fireworks, I suddenly heard the sounds of the glass door opening.

"I'm really sorry for making you do everything, young man."

Seems like Senpai was just done with her shower. She was wearing a tank top along with a pair of shorts. While drying her hair with the towel, she sat herself down on the fence of the balcony.

"Is the bathroom empty?"

"Not yet. Comrade Ebisawa's still in there. She'll probably head over to inform you when she's done with her bath."

After I was done splashing water at the surroundings, I made my way back to the balcony with the pails in my hand, and sat on a chair that was of some distance away from Senpai. What's with her wet hair sticking at the areas of her exposed chest!? I dare not look at her at all. However, Senpai took the initiative to get close to me. I was suddenly nervous when she sat down right next to me.

"Somehow, it feels like young man's the one who is looking after us during the training camp."

Senpai hanged the towel on her shoulders and showed a lazy smile. That didn't sound like something she usually says, and that made me uncertain of how I should respond.

"..... Don't put it to heart. I'm used to doing all these things already."

Ah, right. I can't just head to sleep like this. I lifted my body slightly and took out the recorder from my pocket.

"Well..... I've tried to record something while I was out."





"Hmm?"

"The song that is composed by Senpai. Though it's only me singing along to the accompaniment of the bass."

Senpai stared at me as though I was some sort of brightly shining object, before pressing onto the play button of the recorder. I could hear the sounds of the tape rolling as well as the rhythmic background noise. And then—

The sounds of the waves. And above them, was the soft and elegant chords of the bass.

A simple harmonic progression played using the shuffle rhythm.

Next, is the stuttering sounds of my hoarse voice.

"..... I can't really sing, so I may not be able to convey the feelings in it. This is the opening played in Mr. Big's <[Green-Tinted Sixties Mind](#)>. The song will be ruined if the acoustics are too heavy, so I've decided to use only the bass to play the chords—"

Senpai pressed her finger lightly onto my lips, and that caused me to swallow back the words that I was about to say next. She held onto the recorder with her other hand, as though she was trying to listen to my singing via her sense of touch as well.

When the main chorus had ended, Senpai stood up all of the sudden and pulled me into the glass door. I couldn't help but cover my face with my hands. As expected, I was meddling too much..... Even for someone as incredible as Senpai, she had wrecked her brains to try to come up with an arrangement for the song, but without success. How can someone like me be able to come up with—





"Young man, mind helping me rewind the tape?"

I responded by making a noise. When I lifted my head, Senpai was already standing before me with her Les Paul electric guitar in her hands.

"Eh?"

"I want to listen to it all over again from the beginning."

I was stunned for a while, and just stared into Senpai's eyes, which were burning with passion. I then quickly pressed the rewind button, and rewound the tape all the way to the beginning, before playing it again.

Senpai added in a few simple phrases between my singing voice and the bass. Rather than calling them arpeggios, it's more like the whispers that are produced when the sands are washed about by the waves. Senpai's guitar had connected the blank stutters of the bass naturally, thus etching out a smooth line of melody.

When the song had ended, we remained silent for a long while. I could only hear the tape rolling on - and that too, was disrupted by the sound of the button springing up as the tape reaches the end. Once the recorder had quietened down, all that's left were the sounds of the waves and the insects, as well as the occasional roars of the passing cars from afar.

"You should be the one to sing this song."

Senpai said softly.

"..... Eh? But....."

"So that's the nature of the song huh..... but why didn't I realize it? Even though it's a





song that's written by me."

Senpai leaned the guitar against the table. After rubbing her eyes with her fingers, she looked at me. Perhaps it was due to the backlights, but it seemed like her eyes were slightly wet.

"Urm..... Senpai? Are you angry because of how I had rearranged the song and lowered its pitch—?"

"What are you talking about? I'm not angry! Ah, geez, can you stop talking to me with the voice that you use when you sing? Just stay quiet for a while, or I won't be able to control my urge to hug you tightly!"

I immediately quieten down. I could feel my throat burning up in an instant.

"In any case, this song belongs to you. You will be the one singing this on our actual performance. Alright?"

Senpai's gaze remained fixed on my body. I could only nod my head slightly.

I heaved a slight sigh. Senpai finally broke her sight off me, thus returning me my freedom.

"Why didn't I notice it sooner? It will not do if we are to use my voice. No wait, perhaps I have already noticed it a long time ago.....?"

I suddenly recalled what Mafuyu said—

That..... which means..... is it really that?

"..... Mafuyu, she....."





"Hmm?" Senpai turned her head to face me. Her eyes were slightly red.

Should I ask it or not? The thought streaked past my head suddenly. However, for some unknown reason, I couldn't stop myself from saying it.

"Mafuyu said something like this before. That each and every single song that is composed by Senpai is to be sung by a guy. Is that really true?"

With that, I lifted my head upwards to look at Senpai. This time round, there was an obvious gloominess appearing on her face, just like the dark skies prior to the oncoming downpour. Senpai then used a slight smile to force away that gloomy expression on her face, and said in a murmuring voice,

"She's a really sharp girl."

Senpai smiled lightly, and raised her head to look into the seas of stars scattered across the night sky.

"There used to be this person in the third band that I was in. I thought he was my Paul McCartney, but—I was wrong."

I forgot when it was exactly, but Senpai said something like this before - John Lennon had Paul McCartney, someone whom he could call his 'other half'. Similarly, Senpai is looking for her own Paul.

There used to be someone who stood next to Senpai - a guy. Which means that even till now, all the songs written by Senpai are still bound by his voice?

"In any case, that person is no longer around. Everyone will gradually leave me, away from my side."





Senpai grabbed onto her exposed shoulders as she whispered that out. I trembled from the strange chill that I felt. From the side, Senpai's face seemed like it was shrouded by a patch of dark clouds.

Everyone will leave. The bands which Senpai used to be in had all disappeared as well. Senpai used to say these things half-jokingly with a carefree expression on her face, as though she didn't care a single bit about them.

But, if she really didn't care—

She would not be showing such expressions on her face right now, right?

"..... It will be fine."

Upon hearing me say that, Senpai turned her face slowly towards me. Her eyes were like melting glass.

"It will be alright this time round. We won't disappear. I mean, this is the band that Senpai started by herself!"

"That's true, but..... things are going on too smoothly, and that causes me to be afraid. The thought of the fellow members leaving me one by one - the thought of me being left alone yet again. I'll be uneasy whenever I think of those things. It should be fine if I don't think about those things, but I know very well - I know that people will easily, very easily, just disappear someday suddenly and never return. Those things have been happening again and again, and so....."

"Sen..... pai.....?"

Kagurazaka-senpai quietly placed her hands onto the silent recorder that was on the





table. Her hands were trembling slightly.

"So I've decided to keep moving forward. Be it the training camp or the live performance, I'll decide everything by myself. I'll have to act one step faster in everything..... so as not to suddenly wake up from this beautiful dream."

I could no longer say anything.

People will easily disappear one day all of the sudden - that's something that even I know. One of my close ones had disappeared when I was only six, leaving me and the man who used to be my father behind. The man who shares the same uneasiness as me.

But even so, I could no longer come up with anything to say to Senpai. If the overwhelming confidence from her that's pulling all of us forward is nothing more than an act and a farce, then the actual source of power that is accomplishing everything is just something that is incredibly depressing.

"How strange....." The smile that appeared on Senpai's face was like the pale white skies that are signalling the arrival of dawn. "I actually said everything out loud. Perhaps it's because I feel at ease. Perhaps this time, it will really be okay."

"..... It will be fine."

I could only repeat that line.

"Mmm, that's right. I think I have already found the Paul McCartney that belongs only to me."

The person standing next to Senpai.....





"..... You mean..... Mafuyu?"

Senpai stared hard at my mouth. A strange expression of her half in laughter and half in tears appeared on her face briefly.

And it changed into a dumbfounded expression shortly after.

"Comrade Aihara is always saying that you are an idiot and a dense person....."

Damn it, she's actually talking behind my back..... Urm, no wait, did I..... just say something incredibly stupid?

"You're really an inconceivable guy! Should I say that you're sharp or dense? It's not you pretending that you don't know, right?"

"Urm, sorry, you mean—"

"Paul McCartney's a bassist, right?"

"..... Ah....."

Senpai's words continued to echo in my head. For a moment, I couldn't understand the meaning behind those words. It was till I felt the warmth of Senpai's hands covering mine, that I finally understood.







"Urm, well..... B-But....."

"But— what?"

Senpai moved her face closer. Her smile was returning back to the normal, confident one. As for me, I looked incredibly embarrassing - it was as though my strength was totally sapped away from me.

"B-But I'm not good with my bass....."

"Mmm, I know that. You'll have to practice harder in order to become my pillar."

"I can't compose as well as Senpai does....."

"For someone who snatched my melody from me and thoroughly converted it into something of your own, you sure know how to talk."

"Ugh..... B-But....."

Why was I forced into such a predicament? I was getting more and more confused.

"But I should be the secretary or something right? I can boast about things if I want to, but all I've really contributed is getting Mafuyu into the band. After that....."

"Didn't I say it before? I had my attention on you right from the beginning."

You did say that.....

Senpai increased her grip on my tightly clenched fists.

"I had found you from among the hundreds of articles that your father had written,





you know? If that isn't something special, then the rest of the encounters in this world are nothing more than just a small accident."

Senpai continued talking while staring at me from the side. My heart was beating faster and faster.

"It may be just an excuse when I asked you to invite Ebisawa Mafuyu into the band. In actual fact, I'd have ways of accomplishing it even if I were to do it personally. However, I wanted to let you do it. You do understand what I am saying to you, right?"

Of course I do. What if she's not using me to get Mafuyu into the Folk Music Club, but the other way around.....? No wait, but..... is this person being serious? Her face was close enough to be nearly touching the tip of my nose, and her expression had returned to that of a schemer who plays around with me in her hands. Perhaps the tears that she had shown me earlier was all just an act!

With my mind in chaos, I could no longer pry my eyes away from Senpai's lips.

"Are you..... serious?"

I finally squeezed those words out of my mouth.

"I'm serious all the time."

Senpai moaned sweetly.

Just then, I could hear a *pa* sound coming from behind Senpai.

I quickly moved myself away from Senpai, and had nearly fallen off the chair in the process. I then stood up with the aid of the table. It's all because I saw the white





silhouette of someone behind the glass door. That person had given up trying to shut the door that was left ajar. With her hair swaying close to her body, she was about to make her way back to the hall.

It's Mafuyu.

I brushed aside the chair and made my way through the balcony swiftly, and squeezed in through the slit of the glass door. What's the reason for me to be that anxious? I had no idea at all.

"Mafuyu?"

As I shouted that, the person in her pajamas with her back facing me stopped making her way up the spiraling staircase.

"..... The bathroom's empty. Go and have your shower."

Her voice sounded really stiff. She didn't even spare a look at me. Why? Did she happen to hear the conversation between Senpai and me? How much did she hear?

"Urm..... Mafuyu—"

My tongue's twisted in my mouth. Is it alright for me to stop her? I don't know. All I knew was that there's a bone-chilling air that was blowing straight at my face. Is she angry? Why is she angry?

"So I'm just an excuse."

"..... Eh?"

"Nothing."





Mafuyu then ran up the stairs, rushed straight into her room, and slammed the door shut. The echoes rang through the ceiling of the hall.

I could only stand by the side of the drum set and stare blankly at the silent door that had swallowed Mafuyu.

The door of the room next to Mafuyu's opened up into a small slit, which revealed the sleepy face of Chiaki's.

"What's happening? Anything wrong?"

I shook my head. Since I couldn't bring myself to look straight at Chiaki, I could only fix my gaze at the door of Mafuyu's room.

The sounds of footsteps as well as the scrapping of the closing door came from behind me. However, I remain rooted to where I was, and could not turn my head backwards at all.





Chapter 7

The Place Where She Shuts Herself In



Why is Mafuyu that angry?





It was almost ten the following day, but Mafuyu was still in her bedroom.

"It seems like she's already awake. I just heard the sounds of her changing."

Senpai said that in a depressed manner. Hey, there's another room between yours and hers! There has to be a limit to how sharp your ears can be!

"Even if it's at the other end of the school building, I can still hear the sounds of the girls changing!"

"Geez! Is that what you've always been doing when you were skipping your lessons?"

Upon hearing Chiaki say that in an angry tone, Senpai looked downwards miserably.

"But..... it's always at the most crucial times that I miss hearing things. Just like then. If only I noticed that Comrade Mafuyu was done with her shower....."

Back then? But I don't think Senpai was in the state to be worrying about anything else back then.

Moreover, I was the one who was facing the hall, and I didn't notice Mafuyu was there till there was sound coming from the glass door. It felt like I had done something shameful - but I didn't do anything wrong that would make Mafuyu angry! I didn't, right?

"Why is Mafuyu that angry?"

Chiaki stared at Senpai and I as she tuned the tightness of the snare drum.

"It would have been much easier to deal with it if she was just angry. That was





probably..... her not being angry."

Senpai tilted her head slightly, before giving a sigh. Somehow, she didn't seem to be that worried. It was like I'm the only one who's worried sick, and that made me feel really uneasy.

After we were done with our breakfast, I decided to head to the second floor to check things out. I knocked on the door of her room. No response.

"..... Mafuyu? I brought breakfast over."

I could feel that she was on the other side of the door. She just wasn't giving me any response.

Back then, Mafuyu said—

"So I'm just an excuse."

Which means she had at least heard the last few sentences that Senpai said. She then thought that she was just an excuse for Senpai to get me into the band— no wait, that's not it.

"Mafuyu, please open the door! Let's have a proper talk!"

Should things continue this way, Mafuyu may start thinking in the wrong direction.

I gave up when the door to her room remained tightly shut. I then carried the tray of onigiri back downstairs.

"Is Mafuyu okay?" Chiaki asked. I shook my head.





"There's nothing we can do. Let's practice." As she said that, Senpai had already plugged her Les Paul guitar into the amplifiers, and was ready to go.

Somehow..... it feels like this person isn't concerned about Mafuyu at all. Am I thinking too much into it?

"Is Senpai not worried about Mafuyu?"

Chiaki knitted her eyebrows.

"Of course I am, to the point where it feels like my body is about to be ripped apart. However..... I know there's nothing much that I can do."

"Geez!"

This time, it's Chiaki who ran up the stairs.

"Mafuyu, did something happen? Did that stupid Nao say something terrible again?"

Chiaki's voice traveled down to the first floor. She said in the same ridiculing tone that she uses when she teases me. But this time round, it felt really uncomfortable - as though there's something stuck in between my ribs.

In the end, Chiaki made her way back down dejectedly.

"She didn't even say anything."

Chiaki sat down on the chair of the drum set, and sighed in the direction of the hi-hat's pedal.

"The training camp ends today....."





"We still have some time left before Hiroshi comes over to fetch us."

With that, Senpai gently plucked one of the strings of her Les Paul guitar. It may have been just me thinking too much, but that sentence of hers felt really cold.

"..... Which song shall we practice? Songs from The Eagles again? Since Mafuyu's not around."

"Nope. We'll be practicing on the new song."

Senpai took a quick look at me. The song..... of yesterday?

Chiaki and Senpai discussed how they should go about with the way the drums come in, but I was in no mood to play my bass at all. This is the first day that we'll be practicing this song as a band, and should we carry on with this and work on the song when Mafuyu's not around—

Mafuyu's reason for being here may really just disappear.

I covered my mouth when something came to my mind all of the sudden.

Is that the reason..... that is causing Mafuyu's uneasy feeling? She kept saying how she doesn't know her reason for being here. If that's really the case.....

"Young man?"

"..... Y-Yes?"

I raised my head in response to Senpai's call.





"We'll go with the full ensemble for the intro of the song, and play the first four bars grandly with a *bam*. We'll be using the same chords for section B as well. Well, something like that."

Senpai strummed her guitar gently to demonstrate it to me.

"The sounds of the cymbals will then die down, then it will be linked to the intro that you recorded on the tape yesterday. During the first repeat, the guitar won't be coming in as well. Okay?"

I nodded my head stiffly.

How will Mafuyu feel when she listens to this song?

For a long time, we couldn't agree on the composition of the song. It was then when Chiaki suddenly suggested: "Why don't we remove the drums?" I couldn't understand the reason behind Chiaki's suggestion - it would be too bland with just Senpai's guitar playing in the background. But since we can't make it work with the three of us playing at the same time—

Senpai suddenly lifted both of her hands up to stop us from playing. That was already one of the countless times that we had played the opening intro. Chiaki's drum sticks slid their way down the surface of the cymbals, which produced an uncomfortable scratching sound that filled the entire hall.

"..... What's wrong?"

"Comrade Ebisawa has gone out."





"Eh?"

I lifted my head to look at the corridors of the second floor that was located in the area high above us. She went out? If that's the case, we should have noticed the door of the room opening.

"She went out through the windows. That reckless girl." Senpai quickly turned down the volume of the amplifiers and switched it off. She then threw her guitar onto the sofa and dashed out of the door.

Out through the windows? There are trees close to the windows on the other side of the room, so it's not impossible for her to go down via the trunk of the trees. But..... really? Chiaki was one step faster than me in making her way towards the stairs. Both of us ran up to the second floor quickly, which caused the spiral staircase to creak from our steps. Chiaki opened Mafuyu's bedroom door, but there was no one to be seen. An opened briefcase was placed on the bed. We could see the layers of greenery swaying to the winds through the opened window.

Chiaki leaned her back against the side of the door dejectedly, and slumped down onto the floor.

"Why is she doing such dangerous things despite her immobile fingers....."

I could feel my strength leaving me. I sat on the handrails of the corridor weakly, and stretched out my legs.

Just where is Mafuyu planning to go to? She even ran out barefooted. Damn.....

Is she going to disappear again without saying anything?

"Thank god Senpai realized it."





Chiaki mumbled as she looked towards the opened windows.

That person must have been worrying about Mafuyu in her own way as well — that's probably the reason that we were only practicing the new song, right? Because the tone of that song is the quietest, which makes it the easiest for her to detect the movements on the second floor.

Thank god she noticed it. But I didn't notice anything.

"What exactly happened? Are you not telling me something?"

It was only when I heard Chiaki's words that I lifted my head which was buried in between my knees.

Chiaki bit onto her lower lips and stared at me earnestly.

"..... Actually..... I don't really know either."

"Why is Nao always like this!?"

"Sorry."

But where exactly should I start from? Somehow, it feels like I shouldn't tell her about the gloomiest part of Senpai's heart, even if that person is Chiaki.

"Mafuyu seems to be thinking that it's okay for the band even if she is not around."

"Mmm, I know that."

"And then..... I think she overheard the conversation between Senpai and I....."





probably."

I explained to Chiaki what happened yesterday night. In order for her not to find out about Senpai's painful past, I was paying special attention to my words.

"Which means to say, Senpai used Mafuyu in order to get close to Nao?"

"No, like I've already said, that's not it."

Mafuyu was probably thinking the same thing as Chiaki.

"Senpai was already planning to invite Mafuyu. She just did so through me, even though she could've done it by herself."

Well, if you want to say it in a manner that is as blunt as Chiaki's, it would be - Senpai used me to get Mafuyu into the band, and in order to get me into the band, she manipulated me as well.

There is no need for Mafuyu to be thinking too much into things. If only I had the chance to talk to her properly about it.

"I think Mafuyu probably knows that as well."

"..... Huh?"

"So it's pointless to explain everything to her, because that's not what's important."

I took a glance at Chiaki's side profile. Behind her face, were the leaves and the branches of the trees that were rustling gently in the wake of the breeze. The gaps between the leaves had sliced the rays into multiple strands.





"The reason that Mafuyu's in the band is because of Nao! Do you understand?"

I nodded my head hesitantly. Well, I've heard Mafuyu saying something like that before as well. She said she is following me because Senpai invited me into the band. However, Chiaki shook her head with a slightly sad expression on her face.

"Mmm..... Nao probably won't get it."

"..... Won't get what?"

"Think through it carefully, and find out yourself! I'll be very troubled if you don't realize it yourself."

Just as I was about to continue asking her about it, I could hear the sounds of the main door being knocked on. There's someone knocking on the door. I sprang up and ran down the stairs.

Upon opening the door, I could see Senpai's exhausted face. Mafuyu was on her shoulders with her face green from her exhaustion and her eyes shut tight.

"What happened?"

Senpai dragged herself through the door while carrying Mafuyu on her back.

"She collapsed on the floor, probably from anemia. Comrade Aihara, clear out the space on the sofa."

Chiaki hastily removed the guitar. Senpai then laid Mafuyu's small body horizontally on the sofa. She then propped Mafuyu's legs up using the cushions, so that her head is at a level beneath her feet. Finally, she began loosening Mafuyu's collar.





"Young man, there should be some red tea in the fridge, right? Add some sugar into it, then warm it up with the microwave. Bring it here when it's done."

"Ah, r-right."

Just as I was taking the cup of red tea and walking my way out of the kitchen, Mafuyu's eyes opened slightly - though she still looked to be in a pretty bad shape. Senpai knelt down next to Mafuyu's face. As for Chiaki, she was peeking at Mafuyu's face from behind the sofa.

"You were running about recklessly without eating your breakfast, right?"

Senpai said gently as she touched Mafuyu's cheeks lightly.

"Do you want to drink this? You'll feel better if you do."

Senpai took the cup from me. Mafuyu bit on her lips and shook her head when the cup was held close to her face. Senpai slowly placed the cup on her mouth and took a sip of the red tea. She then got close to Mafuyu's lips— Hey! Hold it right there!

"..... Mmm, mmmmmm!"

With her hands being grabbed onto and her shoulders pressed down, Mafuyu had no choice but to accept Senpai's way of feeding her through the lips, and she was even making some noise through her nose..... Uwa! I knew in my heart that it shouldn't be something that I should be looking at, but I still stared at Mafuyu till she was done swallowing the red tea.

"..... Fuu."

Senpai moved her moist lips away from Mafuyu. She then licked them with an





intoxicated expression on her face.

"Thank you for that!"

"What's with the 'thank you for that'!? What exactly is going through your head at a time like this!?"

I snapped at her without even thinking. As for Chiaki, she was covering her blushing face with her hands.

"I'm sorry. I finally had the chance presented to me!"

"Geez! Stupid Senpai!" Chiaki yelled.

Mafuyu's face was flushed red. She turned her body away and buried her face into the back of the sofa.

"It's an emergency..... so I had no choice but to do it."

T-This person here..... I really couldn't come up with anything else to yell at her.

"Don't mind, Comrade Ebisawa. Just treat it like you were bitten by a stray dog, and forget about it."

"You aren't allowed to talk since you're the culprit behind all this!"

"Hey, there may be a next time if she forgets about it!"

"Behave yourself!"

Senpai patted me on my head when she saw me in my agitated state. Is she joking





about it so as to alleviate the tense atmosphere? Or is she serious about everything that she just said? My head hurts just thinking about it.

Just then, Senpai's handphone on the piano rang.

"..... Yes? Hmm? Ah, mmm. Thanks, I get it..... Mmm, see you later."

Pa. After closing her phone, Senpai turned her head around to look at the hall.

"Hiroshi's about to arrive. He just went past the intersection."

Chiaki and I exchanged looks for a moment, before looking at Mafuyu.

"Let's pack up and clean the hall! Comrade Ebisawa, you rest for a while. Young man, go prepare our bento. Hiroshi probably didn't have his lunch as well. Seems like we don't have much time to spare, so we'll eat on the car instead."

Senpai placed her guitar into its case, and proceeded to pack the stands.

Chiaki's sight landed on Mafuyu's maroon colored hair. After a while, she stood up, made her way to the drum set, and began packing the cymbals.

It's finally about to end? Under such circumstances?

I took another look at Mafuyu's back. Her frail, slender body remained motionless.

In the end, I was unable to talk to her about anything. Mafuyu and I are still unable to communicate with each other properly.

But then..... will everything be fine if we can communicate with each other through words? Chiaki said this: *Mafuyu should know that, but it's not important.*





Which means, it's all because I didn't notice it?

It's a little past noon when I heard the sounds of the engine from outside the door.

"Hmm? Why is everyone not tanned?"

Hiroshi stuck his head out from the driving seat of the SUV.

"We're not here just to swim, but to practice."

Senpai answered while carrying the drums away from the terrace. Mafuyu's still laying on the sofa, and Chiaki went to Mafuyu's room to bring her luggage down. I took their luggage along with mine and placed it in the SUV. Just as I was about to head back to get the rest of the luggage, Hiroshi pulled me by my collar.

"I-Is there something?"

"Did you do something that you weren't supposed to do?"

He didn't seem like he was joking, and that caused me to fluster.

"Urm..... why are you asking that?"

"The mood feels really strange. Even Kyouko has become really meek."

He's really sharp..... as expected from someone who has (probably) known Senpai for a long time already.





"We had a small quarrel."

"Well, that's to be expected, since you're the only guy around! I was thinking that this may not have been the greatest idea."

"Urm..... it's probably not what Hiroshi's thinking."

"Nothing like that happened? But it's three-days and two-nights?"

Hiroshi placed his arms on my shoulders and asked softly.

"Urm..... nothing." The things that he's referring to is probably..... those things, right?

"That's even worse, right? That's not normal at all."

I was getting more and more confused about what he was trying to say.

Just as I was about to walk through the door of the villa, I nearly bumped into Mafuyu, who was carrying the floor tom. Did she just wake up? She still looks like she's in really bad shape.

"It's better for you to continue resting."

I was about to offer to help her with that, but she shook her head silently instead. It should be really dangerous for you to be carrying such a large object with your immobile fingers. Are you really okay with that?

After ensuring that all the doors and windows were locked, plus checking that all power sources were switched off, I then locked the main door and passed the keys to Hiroshi. It was already one o'clock. The weather felt cool though, as the skies were





filled with clouds.

Mafuyu was sitting between Senpai and Chiaki in the back seats. As such, I took the bento and sat down in the co-driver's seat.

"Hiroshi, that was quite an impressive villa."

Senpai said that to Hiroshi when the car hit the road after passing through the forest.

"I want to come here next year as well. The four of us together."

The four of us — coming here together next year. Those words struck a chord somewhere deep in my heart.

"It's okay to lend you guys the villa, but don't ask me to be your driver again. I'm not that free - I'll have to rush down to the studio after this."

"You can just ask someone else to take over for you."

"How can I possibly do that!"

Hiroshi rammed hard on the pedals, and a refreshing gush of wind blew in from the opened windows. I could catch glimpses of the glittering horizon through the trees.

"I'm ferrying three high-school girls, yeah? How can I ask someone else to do this? What will I do if something happened? Also, for nothing to happen despite being together with three girls - that's just embarrassing."

Somehow, it feels like he was directing that at me in a roundabout way. Did he notice? Hiroshi shot a glance at me, and laughed with his shoulders shaking. And since he turned on the stereo immediately after, the conversation ended just like that.





A cheap-sounding but warm timbre of the keyboard as well as the crisp sound of the guitar came from the speakers. It's Mötley Crüe's <[Home Sweet Home](#)>.

Hiroshi gave a huge spin on the steering wheel. The trees on our left disappeared along the bend, and what appeared before our eyes was the sea, as though it was bidding its last goodbye.

It was about four when we reached home. Hiroshi kindly drove each of us back to our homes. Chiaki and I were the last ones left in the car after Senpai and Mafuyu had been dropped off earlier.

"Ah, you can just drop both of us off here. We live close to each other," said Chiaki as she took the luggage out of the boot.

"Sorry for making you drive us home."

"It's on the way, so that's nothing! I'm heading down to Tokyo anyway." Hiroshi removed his sunglasses and showed a wry smile. It's been hard on him. I mean, he only lost a bet.

"Hamasaka, you'll be going to the live performance, right?"

Chiaki stuck her head through the window of the driver's seat from outside, and asked.

"Live performance? We aren't performing together..... Ah, you mean the live performance of Melancholy Chameleon?"





"Yes! I've already got the tickets. I was really surprised when I saw you the day before yesterday."

Chiaki is a fan of his? I'm not too interested in listening to music lately, so I had no idea at all.

"I'll make sure that you can recognize me from the stage. Oh, I'll throw a towel up the stage, so make sure you catch that!"

"Mmm!"

"Well, I'll be in your care during the secret gig too! Ah, we'll still meet each other again during our rehearsals, yeah?"

Hiroshi then moved his sight away from Chiaki and onto me.

"I'm really thankful towards you. Somehow, it feels like I can't lift my head in front of you."

"Forget about it!" Hiroshi hammered me on my shoulders a few times.

"To be able to see Kyouko singing right before my eyes - that's more than enough for me."

I looked at the SUV as it left, and suddenly thought of something - just what is the relationship between Kagurazaka-senpai and him? He seemed to know more about Senpai than all of us, so he probably should have known her from her earlier bands or something?

"Nao, I'll be heading back!"





Chiaki's voice came from my back. I turned around.

"Well, next Monday? See you in school then."

"Ah..... mmm."

Even though it's the summer holidays, the schools are opened during working days, so we can still use the club room. The live performance will be here soon huh.

"You must reflect on lots of things, alright?"

After saying that, Chiaki ran past a turn at the intersection and disappeared.

Reflect..... seems like I'll have to do some reflecting huh? But I had no idea what I should be reflecting on, so that's probably the first on my list.

When I opened the door, a stack of records came crashing onto me like an avalanche, which nearly blew me out of the door. I stepped on a case or something, and I could feel a sort of cracking feeling from the sole of my feet. I had no strength left in me though, so I crawled up the corridor as though I was swimming, and removed my shoes.

"I'm back....."

The clothes in the washing room had already stacked up into a small hill, which looked as though it was some sort of mysterious happening. I was just away from home for two days, so why did things become like this? The kitchen must be worse, so I better not look at that for now.

I was surprised at how there's no music to be heard, and the answer was that Tetsurou was taking a nap on the sofa in the living room. He's quite enjoying himself,





huh.

After a bath at night, I was in my room sitting on my bed and staring at my handphone. For a long time, I was fretting about what I should do.

I already know Mafuyu's number, which means I can call her anytime I want to.

If so, should I give her a call right now?

There are a lot of things that I want to talk to her about - things like if she recovered from her anemia already, and some other stuff. I haven't told her about the new song, and—

Before I knew it, I had already pressed on the call button.

I placed the speaker next to my ears, and listened to the connection tone ringing repeatedly for a while. Just as I was about to give up and disconnect the call, I could suddenly hear a *beep*. A faint breathing sound then caressed my ears.

"..... Yes?"

Mafuyu's voice sounded really fuzzy, as though it had come from the bottom of the swimming pool. Even the sound of the dogs barking sounded much clearer than her voice, despite them coming from a place much further away from the speakers. The scene of Mafuyu throwing the phone to the ground and burying her face in the pillow appeared in my mind.

"Urm..... is your body alright?"





"..... I'm fine."

What a cold reply.

"Really..... but you didn't even take a bite from the bento."

"I ate a little during dinner."

"Is your father..... at Boston?"

"Yes. He won't be back anytime soon."

I had no idea what I should say next. The silence together with the background noise continued on for a while. I could even hear the exhausts of the car that was outside of her house. What's with the incredible performance of her phone? Somehow, the silence became even heavier.

"— Hey....." "—Urm....."

Our voices overlapped with each other. It then became the situation where we couldn't speak again. What the heck am I doing here? Focus! Ain't I consciously aware of it already? We severely lack communication between the two of us.

"..... It's about yesterday."

I finally said it.

"It's about what happened yesterday night. I want to properly talk with you about it. The things that Senpai said."

There was a slight change to Mafuyu's breathing on the other side of the phone.





"You heard everything right? From where onward did you listen to?"

Should Mafuyu not answer, then there's no point in me going on and on by myself. I stared at the backpack on the floor and waited.

"..... Kyouko....." Mafuyu replied with a hoarse voice. "She said that she had her eyes on you right from the start. What does she mean by that? I don't quite understand."

"That's because....."

I pinched my eyelids and thought for a while. Is that really important? I don't get it. Either way, I began explaining it to her from the beginning - about how I would occasionally write critiques in place of Tetsuro, and how Kagurazaka-senpai felt there's something out of place based on those articles alone, followed by how she realized that it was me who wrote those articles instead.

"So Kyouko actually noticed something like that."

After I was done explaining, Mafuyu said that.

"If it was me..... I definitely wouldn't have notice it."

It's normal for you not to. She's the strange one.

"What are you talking about? That's her....."

"Kyouko always had her sights set on you, right? Then she pulled me into the band in order to get you in as well."





"That's not it!" The pitch of my voice raise a bit. "Senpai had always been paying attention to you as well. She had planned to get you into the band right from the start. I'm not lying. I heard this from Senpai: while on the roof of the school's building during a certain rainy day in May, she heard the sounds of a guitar coming from the courtyard. Remember? Book II of <The Well-Tempered Clavier>, where you skipped the fugue and played only the preludes. That was the first time Senpai noticed you, and from then on....."

"I know that."

Mafuyu suddenly interrupted my heated explanation.

"I know that Kyouko..... really likes me. Because she's the sort of person who doesn't lie."

"Mmm. That's why....."

"But I don't care about those things at all."

"Why?"

"Sorry. It's not Kyouko's fault, and neither is it yours. It's just that I..... don't know what I should do."

I had no idea what I should be doing either.

"I..... had never once thought of joining a band, and I don't know anything about rock. Even though Chiaki said it's fine to be like this, but..... but I still....."

..... The sounds of sobbing?







"As expected, I know that it won't do. I know that after last night. It's because..... the band would be nothing to me if you're not around. It's just like how my existence is nothing to the band....."

"I won't leave the band. What are you talking about?"

The things that Senpai said before suddenly appeared in my mind once again — *people will easily, very easily, just disappear suddenly someday and never return.*

"It's not that....."

Mafuyu's voice was trembling.

"Because..... you still have Kyouko, right? Even..... Even if I'm not around—"

It's as if the later parts of her sentence were swallowed by darkness. And the last part of that sentence finally pierced its way into my heart.

"..... Sorry."

After she hung up the phone, I could still hear the remains of her voice in my ears. It's as though I could feel her silky smooth maroon long hair just by moving my shoulders a little.

I still have Senpai..... what does that mean? What exactly is she saying?

'Even if I'm not around—'. That's what she said. So that's where the problem lies.

I had no idea how she had gotten herself in that place. However, I finally understood





the situation Mafuyu was in, and I knew what sort of place she had shut herself into.

And also— it's much more than just the communication of words that's lacking between us.

But if that's the case..... just what is lacking between us? And what should I do from now on?





Chapter 8

The Other Side of the Globe



I managed to get my hands on it after
sneaking into Comrade Ebisawa's house last night.





On the following Monday, Chiaki and I had agreed to meet at the train station before heading to school together. Some of the teachers-on-duty won't be at the school that early during the holidays, which means that we may not be able to draw the keys for our morning practice. As such, Chiaki had no choice but to go along with me, who loves lazing around on my bed, and agreed to meet at a later time.

That morning, we couldn't manage to find the key to our club's practice room in the key box.

"..... Senpai took it?"

"It's probably her."

We confirmed that with each other. Over the weekends, we tried to make several calls to Mafuyu, but she never picked up any of them.

The two of us made our way to the back of the school building. When we opened the door, a series of intensive piano passages overwhelmed us, and that caused me to shield my face with my hands without thinking.

In the middle of the cramped classroom, I could almost see the grand piano as well as the maroon long hair behind it that was swaying along with the rhythm of the melody - however, that was just a brief mirage. There's only a set of drums huddling in one of the gloomy corners of the room. In front of the mini amplifier to the left, was the back of someone together with her braided black hair.

Kagurazaka-senpai was sitting on the round stool and listening to the piano piece, and she was almost sprawling over the speakers. The room was engulfed in heat since she didn't switch the air-conditioning on.

This— This song is—





"..... Hmm? Morning, my fellow comrades."

Senpai turned around to greet us with a smile, despite her looking all worn out. Chiaki pushed the dazed me aside, walked into the room, and sat down on the chair behind the drum set.

"Senpai, are you okay? You don't look too good....."

"Mmm. I've been listening to this song without sleep since last night. There's absolutely no time for me to relax and rest!"

Then just stop listening to it continuously? I closed the door and walked into the classroom, before switching on the air-con.

"What song is this? It's really incredible..... Is it really played by a human being?"

It really is played by a human being. I could tell just by listening to it - the person playing it is none other than Mafuyu.

Senpai pressed her face against the speakers and continued listening to it in silence. Therefore, I answered in her place,

"The song's name is <[Islamey](#)>. It's the world's hardest piano piece."

"I see....."

But is that really being played by Mafuyu? I don't remember her releasing that piece before.

"This is played by Mafuyu, right? Where did you get your hands on that?"





"Young man, you can really recognize immediately if it's a piece that is played by Mafuyu!"

Because there's no one else who'd play it in that manner! This is not the fastest version of <Islamey> that I had listened to before, but..... In any case, she had managed to allow the listeners to clearly discern the part where her left hand was playing out the notes that were moving up and down the scales, while maintaining a flawless tempo at the same time - and since <Islamey> is a dance-tune, her way of playing may actually be the correct way of doing it.

"This is an unreleased recording. I managed to get my hands on it after sneaking into Comrade Ebisawa's house last night."

"What the hell have you done!?" That is definitely a crime, isn't it!?

"I didn't steal this, yeah? It's already my second time sneaking into Comrade Ebisawa's house, and this time I managed to locate her room successfully. Though I didn't expect her to throw this tape at me in the moment of her fury. Seems like she's really unhappy about being seen by others while she is listening to piano pieces, so I said nothing else and got myself out of there as quickly as I could."

"Senpai, you really should be sent to jail, I'll bring along some tonics when I visit you." Chiaki's eyes were actually wet.

"Thank you. You are not to fall in love with anyone else while I'm serving my sentence, okay?"

"Mmm!"

"That's not funny at all! Stop fooling about, or I'll really call the cops!"





"Sigh, young man is not the least bit poetic....."

That has nothing to do with being poetic or not! Senpai ignored my protests, and picked up her guitar that was already connected to the amplifiers. After muting her guitar by applying the palm mute, she began playing notes with almost no intonation in them, and used them to gently accompany the chords that were repeatedly struck out by Mafuyu and played via the speakers. It's a sound that will make one feel like responding after listening to it.

Zun — a heavy sound rang, followed by a delicate and brief triplet - Chiaki's drums began to join in as well, and she started off with the subtle beats of the ride cymbals together with the snare drums. As the melody of the piano moved into the climax, Senpai's guitar was roaring in response as well; as for the drums, it had transformed into a fervent tempo that is focused on the bass drums.

I see, that does sound like the traditional dances of Caucasus - very passionate but unrefined. I removed my bass case from my shoulders and leaned it against the wall, before sitting down on the cushion on the floor. Should there be no interruptions, the members of this band can just jam on non-stop for several hours— well, aside from me, that is. But looking at the current situation..... can I include Mafuyu as well? We're talking about something that is way outside of my territory - won't they get tired at all?

Whatever. The recorded <Islamey> by Mafuyu will have to come to an end. I listened to it in a daze - the piece had lightly skipped through the slow part in the middle (but that's the part that I loved the most), and went straight to the back, before starting all over again from the beginning. W-Wait a second? That's not how the piece is supposed to be, right?

"What's this? Why is it going on and on forever?"





I couldn't help but stand up and interrupt their performance. Chiaki stopped her movements and stared at me with her face red. Senpai laughed and switched off the mini amplifiers.

"I didn't sleep a wink last night after returning home. After cutting and sampling the piece, I made it so that it will repeat on and on non-stop. With that, we can use it as a disco piece! The tempo of Comrade Ebisawa's performances are all very distinct, which makes them suitable to be used for things like this."

"Just sleep properly and stop doing these things! You look really horrible, yeah!?"

"How can I possibly go to sleep when I didn't manage to have a proper talk with Comrade Ebisawa?"

I sank weakly into the cushion on the floor.

That means that I was the only one who managed to speak with Mafuyu after the training camp?

"So, what's going on here? We have less than a week before our live performance....."

The actual performance is this Saturday. If this carries on—

"Comrade Ebisawa hasn't even practiced our new piece before. In any case, let's record it for now! Hey young man, begin with the preparations!"

"..... Ah, right."





We burned the whole day to record that song. Since Mafuyu wasn't around, we couldn't decide on the actual arrangement of the song. We managed to fill up the thirty-minute tape by trying out various different arrangements.

"I'll deliver this to her," Chiaki said. "This is for Mafuyu, right?"

"Are you taking it there? Aside from the guards, there are two Dobermans in her courtyard as well. I suggest that you take the much safer route by infiltrating from the underground pipes or something."

"Can't we just visit her normally and openly!?"

"This is the map to the livehouse. We have a rehearsal on Friday, so remember to ask her to come!"

Senpai ignored me totally and passed the tape, scores and the livehouse's handout to Chiaki. As for Chiaki, she was staring at the map that was printed on the handout.

"So..... she may not be coming here even once till Friday?"

"Mmm..... that's quite possible."

"How can she do that!"

Forget about the rehearsal, she may not even appear on the actual day of the performance - all three of us knew of that possibility, but we just refrained from mentioning it.

Should I follow along as well? Perhaps it will be better for Chiaki to go alone instead..... since it seems like I was the one who made Mafuyu angry. Just as I was





thinking of that, Chiaki grabbed me by my collar and said, "Nao, you're coming along as well!"

"Uh..... mmm....."

"Don't you want to go?"

"It just feels like..... she'll refuse to see me even if I go?"

"Why?"

"It somehow feels like I've pissed her off or something..... She probably hates me right now."

"Senpai, can I punch him?" Chiaki turned towards Senpai to seek her opinion in the matter.

"If a punch is all it takes to solve his denseness, then all the psychologists in the world would be left jobless. Quit with your excuses and just go along honestly. You have an excuse for meeting Comrade Ebisawa as well, do you not?"

Senpai shot a glance at the corner of the room. I followed her gaze and looked in the direction as well.

My backpack was stuffed on the very bottom of the shelf, and hanging on it was the recorder that I borrowed from Mafuyu. It had been there ever since the training camp was over.

"Yeah..... I guess."

It won't do for us to remain in our current situation. I walked over to pick up the





backpack.

Even though the train station closest to Mafuyu's house is located at the fringes of the city, there were quite a lot of passengers getting on and off the trains here, as it is an interchange that links the JR and the private railways together. In front of the station is a leisure walkway paved out of red bricks, as well as a shopping arcade. I came here a few times to shop for my books as well. However, there weren't many people to be seen on the streets once we were about a hundred meters away from the station. The houses on our sides were gradually merging into the scenery of dusk.

We had braced ourselves to get lost, but it turned out that we worried for nothing. Mafuyu's house was incredibly large, to the point that we could easily see it even without confirming with the map.

I originally thought it was a park with coniferous trees planted in it - but after confirming the utility poles that were around with the map on her handphone, Chiaki said, "Mmm, this is it." We finally found a large black arching gate with inverted spikes on them amid the trees, and past the arching gate was a building that looked like a museum or something. So Ebichiri's that rich huh.....

"Ah, there really are dogs in the courtyard! Ain't those Dobermans cute? There, they're looking in our direction!"

Chiaki stuck her hand in between the rails of the arching gate and waved hard at the black shadows that were sitting next to the flowerbed. What the heck are you here for?

We then found an intercom and its button that's located at the doorpost at the side of the gate.





"Will the dogs come pouncing on us with their teeth bared if I press this button?" Chiaki asked.

"How's that possible!?"

But even so, we dared not press on the intercom for a long time. What should we do if Mafuyu is the one who answers us? I'm not mentally prepared for that yet, and I don't know what I should say when I see her.

"Heh!" in the end, it was Chiaki who pressed the button. It felt like the black silhouettes of the dogs had moved a little, which caused me to hide myself behind the doorpost instinctively.

A short while later, came the voice of a woman from the intercom.

"..... Yes? May I know who is this?"

That's— not Mafuyu's voice. The female voice sounded way more mature.

"..... U-Urm, well....."

Chiaki pushed my face aside and spoke into the intercom,

"Good evening, I'm Aihara. I am..... Mafuyu's fellow club-mate, from the high school that she is studying at. She didn't attend today's practice. Thinking that she may be feeling unwell, we have come to visit her. We have some things that we want to pass on to her as well."

I was impressed with how Chiaki said all that fluently without the slightest hint of stuttering. She's lying about us visiting Mafuyu in fear that she is sick, but we do





have things that we wanted to pass on to her, so they may actually allow us to enter. Chiaki's probably playing it by the ear - and as for me, what have I done here? I'll have to buck up as well!

"Please hold on for a moment."

The intercom fell silent with that coming from the woman.

"Will Mafuyu come out?" Chiaki mumbled.

"I don't know."

Then again, since Chiaki didn't mention my name just now, perhaps.....

I sat down at the base of the doorpost. Even though the sun was on its way down the horizon, the asphalt still feels incredibly hot.

I could suddenly hear the sounds of someone walking on the turf. I stood up immediately.

There was someone walking through the spacious courtyard and towards the door. It's a tall woman with short hair, and wearing a grey suit with long pants. She patted the Dobermans that had walked close to her, and made them sit down before she came to the door.

"Sorry for making you two wait."

She's young - probably between the age of twenty-five to thirty. Her hair was cut rather short, which made her face look fresh and neat. She's wearing a pair of elegant earrings as well. Who is she? Mafuyu's family? Nope, doesn't look quite like it.





The woman walked out through a small door which was located at the side of the gate, and bowed to Chiaki and I.

"I am the person in charge of tending to the daily lives of Maestro Ebisawa and the young lady. Despite having both of you traveling all the way here, my mistress is unable to meet you."

"Is she feeling unwell?"

Chiaki took a step forward and asked worriedly with her brows furrowed.

"No. My mistress has instructed me to convey the message that she is feeling unwell, but I'm afraid that is probably a lie."

Despite her courteous mannerisms, her words were rather direct and straightforward.

"Maestro Ebisawa has overly doted on our young lady, which results in her being unable to listen to anything when her tantrum kicks in. I shall apologize to you two on behalf of my mistress. If there is anything that you wish to pass on to her, you can do so through me."

How should we respond with her speaking to us in such a solemn and serious manner? But as I was thinking up of something, Chiaki had already handed her the handout of the livehouse, the scores of our new song as well as the tape.

"Is that all? Did she not say anything else?"

From the tone of Chiaki's voice, it's as though she was about to cling herself on the woman.

"No. Nothing at all."





"You should have told her my name, right?"

"Yes. I had told mistress that Miss Aihara and a man had come over to visit her."

She didn't tell her my name — will Mafuyu know who that person is? Then again, I don't think there would be any other guy who would come looking for her, right? And that means..... that she really is unwilling to see me?

"At the very least, Mafuyu can tell us that herself via the intercom, right?" Chiaki refuse to give in.

"My mistress has no intention of leaving her room at all."

"Then we shall communicate with pen and paper! Miss, please help us to pass it to her!"

"That's enough, Chiaki."

I grabbed Chiaki on her shoulders and pulled her away as she was about to trouble the woman further. I then lowered my head and apologized,

"I'm really sorry. Urm..... we have no choice but to trouble you to pass her those items. And also, please tell her that there's a rehearsal on Friday. Tell her to make her way down to the place that's marked on the map at three o'clock."

"Yes. I will definitely convey that to mistress."

She didn't show the slightest smile while answering - what a strange person. As for Chiaki, she was grabbing me tightly by my arm and giving a soft whimper, just like that of a dog's..... Just give up already!





Just as I was about to make my way towards the station while dragging Chiaki along with me—

"Please hold on a second."

I turned my head in response to her call, and saw the woman walking towards us in quick steps.

"Could it be, that you are actually Mr. Hikawa Naomi?"

"..... Eh? Yeah. That's me."

Chiaki looked at me in surprise, and then at the woman.

"I see. I am sorry for calling you out all of the sudden. Mistress has always mentioned Mr. Hikawa."

Mafuyu— she always talks about me? Mmm, I think Ebichiri said something similar as well, but is that really true?

"..... She always talks about me?"

"Yes. She says that you are someone who is dense, unreliable and mouthy. She will always gets angry whenever she is with you."

She sure doesn't mince her words!

"Yes, that's exactly how it is!" Chiaki chipped in.

"However, she frequently uses the term 'unreliable' on her father as well. Therefore, I





think that may be her way of showing how dear the two of you are to her."

"Haa.....?"

No, wait, you don't have to put it like that just to console me, yeah? In any case, I'm just a.....

Just as I was acting all depressed, the woman suddenly handed out her name-card.

"I am sorry to be introducing myself only now. My name is Matsumura. Please do not hesitate to contact me if it is anything related to our young lady. Honestly speaking, I am not too sure of how I should interact with my mistress as well. I will be more confident in doing so if I have the chance to interact with Mr. Hikawa and her fellow schoolmates."

Miss Matsumura continued to speak with us with the same emotionless expression and unfaltering voice. She passed a name-card to Chiaki as well.

There was nothing about her position or the name of any company printed on the name-card - just her name "Matsumura Hitomi" and her handphone number printed on it. That accomplished just about nothing for your self-introduction, yeah?

"It is great to meet the two of you."

Miss Matsumura bowed again before making her way back to the mansion.

"..... What a strange person."

Chiaki murmured as she stuffed the name-card into her pocket.

"But she should be trained in martial arts or something."





"You can actually see that?"

"Mmm, because her center of gravity is kept very stable when she moves. She's probably Mafuyu's personal body guard?"

In any case, it's good to have someone who I can contact, and I may actually get to ask about Mafuyu's situation. However, it's only six days till our live performance. Is there really no other way left?

"So aside from the two Dobermans, we'll also have to take down that woman as well before we can see Mafuyu?"

Chiaki said something really dangerous in a soft voice.

"Ahh— I've had enough! I'll break in through the front!"

Chiaki turned around. I quickly grabbed her by her shoulders to prevent her from walking towards the mansion.

"Let me go! I'm an elite beginner dan in Judo, so there won't be any problem!"

"No way!"

A well trained Doberman dog is the strongest living creature on the planet!

"But Mafuyu is really going overboard with this!"

Chiaki suddenly grabbed me by my collar, sank her leg in between mine and swept me off the ground. My butt landed hard on the ground. It hurts.....





When I raised my head, I could see Chiaki putting on a serious expression with tears in her eyes,

"We're actually bandmates! Hearing the palm mutes twice and the sounds of the hi-hat four times is all Mafuyu and I need for us to understand what the other party is about to do next, and that's the understanding that we have just from playing together for one month! If we want to, we can even jam on for five to six hours consecutively, and yet Mafuyu....."

Chiaki knelt down to punch my shoulders - and it was a really weak punch.

"All Mafuyu thinks of is Nao! Isn't..... isn't that just unfair for the rest of us!"

She only thinks about me.

Chiaki's body relaxed all of the sudden. I caught her by her shoulders in order to prevent her from collapsing onto me.

All Mafuyu thinks about is me — is that really true? Perhaps it is. It's actually just a problem between Mafuyu and me, but it somehow escalated into something that causes feketerigó to lose her right arm, and is thus on the brink of collapse - there's still no changing Kagurazaka-senpai's cruel fate.

It's really..... sad.

"..... Sorry."

Chiaki said that with her head bowed low, and at the same time she stood up by pressing against my shoulders..... is she crying?

"It's nothing. I'm not crying."





Chiaki shook her head fervently. She left me by myself and began making her way back to the station. I hurriedly caught up to her, but I was hesitating if I should walk by her side.

"Chiaki, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm a beginner dan in Judo, so I'm very strong."

That's not related at all, okay? Chiaki's voice was unnaturally cheerful. She hastened her steps to walk at a distance of about half a step in front of me, but she didn't turn her head back, which resulted in me being unable to continue our conversation.

Mafuyu didn't appear in the club room the following day as well. Chiaki and Kagurazaka-senpai were actively discussing the tracks that we would be singing on the performance day, as well as what we should wear on stage. However, they didn't mention anything about Mafuyu.

"I want to make the T-shirts of feketerigó. About ten of them."

"It will look really stupid if all of us wear the same shirt up on stage, yeah?"

"I'll be the only one who's wearing it. The rest of the band members will all get one each. As for the remaining ones, I'll sell them at four thousand yen each."

"That sounds pretty good. Let's start by designing the logo."

I sat in a corner of the room while hugging my bass, and looked at Chiaki and Senpai from a distance as they tried to come up with the logo in the shirt in a strangely





enthusiastic way. That name is something that Mafuyu had came up with, so how did they manage to talk about it without feeling anything?

In the next moment, the two of them suddenly quietened down. They looked at the amplifiers next to the right of the entrance gloomily - the place where Mafuyu always stood - and that caused my chest to hurt.

I see. The reason for both of them to not touch their instruments and only chat is because—

It's because there will be music whenever we're all together. All Senpai needs to do is to signal with her eyes, and Chiaki will then twirl her drum sticks. Mafuyu will draw her eyelids back slightly and stare at the strings next to her hands. Next, the jam session will begin, and it will flow on and on, as though the concept of time didn't exist.

And I'll be exhausted from trying my hardest not to be left behind in their wake.

Should Mafuyu not appear during the rehearsal and the actual performance, then what should we do? A band with a member missing is not something as simple as four minus one is equals to three - it's almost equal to zero. Does Mafuyu understand that?

I couldn't help but lay my eyes on Senpai. Will she come up with something like she always does? Since she always scatters some weird seeds in places that I would never have thought of.

And when Senpai noticed me looking at her, she showed a slight smile and waved at me.

I shifted my chair next to the drum set, and sat down.





"Yes?"

"I'll just state this clearly - I won't be doing anything this time."

"Eh.....?"

Chiaki looked at me and then at Senpai with an uneasy expression on her face.

"Urm....."

She's referring to the things about Mafuyu, right? But somehow, it's hard for me to say her name at a time like this.

"There's two reasons. One, should Comrade Ebisawa not show up here ever again, then it will be my win. Though this victory will be something that's helplessly sad and empty."

"What's the thing that you'd win?"

"Actually, that's not a result that I wanted. My victory should not be built on the loss of others. But it's not like I have a choice in that. While I am a revolutionist and a musician, I am also a woman in love at the same time."

What the heck is this person talking about? While I was dumbfounded from that, Chiaki took a drum stick and pointed it at Senpai's chest.

"Senpai, you've involved yourself in too many romances!"

"Can't help it, I was born like that! Romance takes up about eighty percent of me!"





"And the remaining twenty?"

"Thirty percent is lust, and ten percent is crushes."

"That's all the same, isn't it!"

"..... There's an excess of twenty percent, yeah?"

"And the second reason - this is not my fight." Don't ignore my question and just move back to the original topic as you wish! "If it's for my victory, I'll resort to all means to plant the seeds of possibility everywhere possible, and wait for spring to come. However, it's your fight this time around. Just like back then, I won't mind lending you my helping hand should you need assistance. However, I won't be proactively doing anything."

I shifted my gaze away from Senpai's knees and onto the floor.

"..... Since I am not a poetic person, can you please put it in simpler terms that I can understand?"

Actually, I had some idea about what Senpai was trying to say.

It's probably something that is to be expected, and something that's important. Senpai planted her hands firmly on my shoulders and said,

"Come up with something by yourself."

Senpai's words penetrated through my whole body, all the way to my feet.

I nodded my head slowly.





"Lil' Nao, I'm done with my articles already! Hurry up and prepare my meal! I want something luxurious!"

Upon reaching home, I could see Tetsurou dashing towards the door. As it looked like he was about to pounce onto me, I removed my shoe and threw it at him for good measure.

"My feelings of joy will not be extinguished by something like this!"

The overture of <[A Midsummer Night's Dream](#)> by Mendelssohn were blaring loudly from the direction of the living room. It's a song that Tetsurou will always listen to whenever he is done with some major articles. Since he was kidnapped and locked up by the publisher since yesterday in order to force him to write his articles, there was some stubble as well as dark eye circles on his face.

"..... Did you eat your meals properly?"

"Those people placed me under house arrest, and they banned me from calling room service! I was forced to eat microwave fried rice with crab meat."

"Oh, is that so? Then I'll cook fried rice without crab meat for our dinner tonight."

"I am in tears by Nao's kindness!"

"Then I'll hold back on the salt as well."

"Why do you say nothing but such cruel words? What sort of education have you gone through for you to become so difficult to deal with? I really want to take a look at the person who brought you up to be who you are today!"





"And that person is none other than you!"

I originally wanted to drag him to the the mirror in front of the washing basin, but that would be too much of an effort, so I dropped the idea.

Just as I was preparing our dinner in the kitchen, the suite from the living room had entered into the famous wedding march, which really made me feel like dying. Why the hell must I listen to such joyous songs together with Tetsurou when I am in such a bad mood!? Why!? Hurry up and move to the funeral march already!

"Why are we having Kimchi jjigae despite the hot weather?"

Tetsurou complained when he saw me placing our dinner on the table. Shut up. It's because it's easier to prepare stew, that's why!

"Don't eat if you don't like it!" I stared fiercely at Tetsurou while helping myself to the rice. He had already filled his bowl with grilled tofu and beef rump, and was eating them with huge bites. Can't do anything about him. Then again, I've always been curious - this guy here always washes down his food with sake..... is his sense of taste really okay?

"You're the child of Misako and me, so why is Nao's cooking so good?"

"It's because both of you don't know how to cook!"

I do occasionally worry if Misako is able to live properly by herself.

"Ah, is that so? I see, so that's how it is. Well well, I was worried for a second if you were actually my real child or not."





"I sometimes wonder if I'm Tetsurou's child or not as well!"

"Don't worry. It's not your fault."

"And it's all yours, Tetsurou!"

I had no idea what I was bullshitting with him.

After he was done with the sake, Tetsurou began drinking whiskey and pairing it up with the stewed vegetables at the bottom of the pot.

"Then again, it's not like Misako and I broke up because we were cheating on each other, so you shouldn't be the child of another man."

Why the heck is he saying things like this in front of his real son?

"We used to be very much in love! I mean, you know it as well, but I'm neither dependable nor do I know how to read the mood of others. And it just so happens that Misako is someone who doesn't hold any ulterior motives behind the way she acts, so we were very direct with each other."

"Really? That's good."

"And since you're very similar to me, it's pointless for you to dwell on the problems you have with women! Just give up already!"

"I'm not troubled—"

"But you've said nothing about the training camp at all! You definitely won't talk about it if I was hounding you enthusiastically - but this time, I haven't asked you anything at all! Since you've said nothing to me, it means that you must've done





something that you cannot say to your father, right? Damn you bastard, you actually went to a villa near the beach with three cute girls for three-days and two-nights! Why didn't you bring me along with you? Sex education has to continue all the way till you've reached the age of eighteen!"

I poured water directly onto Tetsurou's head, and that caused him to quiet down. This guy here can be quite sharp sometimes for no reason. How very irritating.

I didn't have much of an appetite, so it's Tetsurou who finished the pot of Kimchi jjigae (which serves three) almost by himself. After I was done washing the dishes, I took a glass of wheat tea and went to the living room. Tetsurou was sprawled all over the sofa while hugging the whiskey bottle. He suddenly said,

"..... Hey, do you know what Misako said to me when she had decided to divorce me?"

"Why are you bringing that up all of the sudden? How would I know!"

I was six back then, so I had no ability to discern things that were not directly related with me.

"She said nothing at all. And I said nothing either."

In the rare occasion where the living room was not filled with the sound of music, Tetsurou's words lingered stagnantly in the air. He sank himself deep into the sofa opposite of me, and kept staring at the water droplets that were on the outer surface of the glass.

"Misako said that she didn't wish for you to hear us talking about things like that, so we said nothing in the end. On that day, I was lying on the sofa and listening to Mendelssohn, just like I had done earlier. The wedding march was playing when





Misako got back home from work. At that time, I could almost see a flash of electricity, and we both came to a consensus right after that."

The tone of Tetsurou was too sober for it to be one of his jokes when he's drunk.

"And the next morning, it became a situation of 'Have you stamped it already?' 'Then I'll take it to the district office' - like that. It would be a wonderful scene if it was something that happened during our wedding, but sadly we were about to divorce with each other. A ha ha!"

That's not funny at all..... and the two of you didn't think about what to do with me? Though it's something I expected anyway.

"There's a lot of things..... that cannot be conveyed with just words alone."

That line from Tetsurou made me raise my head.

"In my line of work, it's like I'm confirming that fact every single day. Those guys were born on the other side of the globe about two to three hundred years ago, and they were living lives that were totally different from ours - and yet the songs that they've composed are touching our hearts, even now. You can never succeed just by clearly saying what's on your mind, because the power of words won't be able to overcome what's in our hearts. Wow, those are quite some words from me! I'll write it down in my next critique."

"You're just copying the lyrics from Chage and Aska!" [TLnote: [Wiki link here](#)]

"Who cares, it's not like I have a girl whom I'm in love with right now! But should I meet a girl who doesn't talk about anything, like how Misako was - then I'll probably be a little envious of Nao, who still has a chance of doing something."





The chance to do something..... huh? Which means that I'm no longer someone who simply accepts and critiques in return? But what does that change? What can I possibly convey to Mafuyu with the way I am now?

Just as I was about to reply with that, Tetsurou was already snoring.

After a bath, I returned to my bedroom, and sat down next to my bed. On the desk was my handphone, and next to the phone laid the tape recorder that I borrowed from Mafuyu.

I didn't pass the recorder to Miss Matsumura back then. I couldn't.

It feels like if I am to ask someone to pass this back to Mafuyu, then there wouldn't be any more bonds between Mafuyu and I.

But when should I return this to her? Since I'm grabbing onto this without letting it go, doesn't that just prove that I'm a really useless person?

There are a lot of things that cannot be conveyed by words alone.

That's what Tetsurou said. And that may very well be the case - there really are a lot of things that we can't convey with just words. But why does it have to happen at a time like this? We are less than a week away from the live performance!

I grabbed my handphone and made a call to Mafuyu. The connecting tone was cut off after ringing thrice, and I was directed to her voice mail. I suddenly felt a surge of anger in me when I heard the mechanical tone that asks you to leave a message.

"..... Mafuyu? It's me. You shouldn't forget that I still have your mother's memento





in my possession. If you don't come for practice, then I don't know what'll happen to it! And also, you better come for the rehearsal as well, so stop creating trouble for the rest of us already! That's all!"

I hung up the phone after saying what I wanted to say.

Perhaps she won't hear what I said, but I can't stay silent.

My head felt like it was burning. It's already night, but the temperature's still hot. I decided to just head to sleep. It was a few minutes later that I realized I had said 'your mother's memento' during the voice message. I rolled about on the wooden floor and felt like dying. Her mother's not even dead yet! Why did I say something like that!?





Chapter 9

The Song of Blackbird

.....Nao? What's wrong?





The livehouse that we're supposed to perform at is located in the city next to ours. It stands in the center of a quiet residential area.

If I took the train there, I'd have to transfer lines and travel for quite some distance - as such, I had decided to just ride a bicycle instead. It was a Friday where the skies were filled with dark clouds - and also the day of our rehearsal before the real performance.

As I traveled on the side roads that is located next to the national highway and extends along the outskirts of the city, I could see the old houses that are lined up together, as well as the warehouses of the People's Association and etc. For the building in which the livehouse is located, the second floors and above consists of apartments, while the first floor is filled with offices. There's a huge notice board at the entrance that is filled with all sorts of posters and advertisements. A small blackboard was placed on a tripod stand, and the events of the night were written on it with chalk of various colors.

The signboard of the livehouse is not too big. Printed on it was the name of the shop "Bright" with a white cursive font.

Speaking of which, even though it is located at such a remote place, <Bright> is quite famous around here. I've heard that there's quite a few bands and their fans that had traveled all the way from Tokyo just to come to this place.

It was three when I reached <Bright>, and the sun was still shining high above me. However, there were already a few large cars that were parked in the gravel parking lot located next to the building. There's some young men who were loitering around the entrance that leads underground. Judging from their hairstyle as well as the clothes they were wearing, they didn't seem to be your typical civilians.

I saw a familiar person among those people, and heaved a sigh of relieve. Hiroshi's





wearing a black vest that exemplifies his well-toned body, and it makes it easy for people to spot the chameleon tattoo that he has on his arm.

There's a guy with long hair that's standing next to Hiroshi. He's biting on an unlit cigarette, and the bandanna on his head was nearly covering his eyes. The silhouette of the person with a guitar on his back was giving off a dangerous aura around him - somehow, I had seen him before somewhere.

"Yo! You're here already. Kyouko's already in the basement."

Hiroshi happened to spot me as well, and he invited me over with a wave of his arm. Thank god for that, or else I wouldn't have the guts to walk into a place like this by myself. I shrunk my neck and walked towards Hiroshi slowly, passing by the other rockers on my way. He then suddenly point at the person next to him and said,

"This guy's Furukawa. He's our lead singer."

"Hey you, you must be laughing to yourself whenever you call me the lead singer, yeah? Quit making cold jokes about me being a funny lead singer or something, alright?"

The long-haired guy was saying that in a tone that didn't seem to be joking, and he even gave Hiroshi a shove on his shoulder.

"Well, that's okay, cause I'm the funny guitarist too!"

"Shut your trap."







Ah..... could this person be.....?

"Sorry, are you actually..... TAISEI?"

So that explains why I found him familiar looking - he has appeared on the magazine that I write critiques for. It's a very serious magazine about classical music, so it's really rare for them to publish an interview of a rock band's guitarist. That's the reason why he has a lasting impression in me.

"That's the name that I use when I'm in the Melancholy Chameleon. For now, my name's Furukawa Taisei," TAISEI, no wait, Furukawa stared at me with a sullen expression on his face.

"Oi, you don't know anything about me, so how do you know Furukawa?"

"Eh? Ah, because the magazine 'Friends of Musicians' once published an article about him....."

"That's a magazine about classical music, right? Ah, I think you've said something like that before? Ain't that good for you, Taisei? You have a new fan for yourself who came from another area of music!"

"Just shut up already. Isn't it about time we go in?"

Furukawa walked down the stairs. I stopped Hiroshi as he was about to follow Furukawa.

"..... Urm, did Mafuyu come?"

"Hmm?"





"She's the mixed-blood....."

"Ah! You mean that cutest girl? The one who's always angry? She's not here yet!"

"..... I see....."

I couldn't help but lift my head and take a look at the gloomy skies as I walked down the stairs. I dazed out for a while.

Mafuyu didn't attend any of the practices in school, and she didn't pick up any of our calls. Which means..... she probably won't be coming today either?

"She's the girl you said you quarreled with?"

As we were walking down the stairs, Hiroshi suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned around to ask me that question. The tattooed chameleon was shining brightly before my eyes, which shocked me.

"..... Eh? Well..... we haven't quite reached the state of quarreling yet....."

"I see. Then can I make a move on Kyouko while you're still hesitating?"

"Haa.....?"

I missed my step and nearly rolled down the stairs. I quickly regained balance of myself by leaning my body against the wall. Since I could hear multiple footsteps approaching from behind me, I moved my face close to Hiroshi's and asked in a low voice,

"What do you mean? Why are you suddenly asking that?"





"Nothing much. I thought it would be better if I confirmed something first."

"But why are you confirming with me? Speaking of which, urm..... what's the sort of relationship between you and Senpai?"

"Hmm? How old are you? Shouldn't be past eighteen, right?"

"I'm just in my first year in high school."

"Mmm..... then I can't tell you just yet. Wait till you're older before you ask me that question again!"

So what sort of relationship do they share? Now I'm really curious.

And with the conversation that left me hanging, we were done with the long flight of stairs, and what appeared before us was a sturdy soundproof wall. That reminds me, this is the first time that I've gone to a livehouse, so I'm really nervous.

I followed Hiroshi and slipped my body horizontally past the heavy doors of the shop. A stinging smell that consists of a mixture of cigarette smoke, sweat and alcohol assaulted my nose.

Despite the place being very spacious, I couldn't shake off the difficulties that had in breathing. At a short distance away from the door were a few round tables and chairs scattered about, and further in was a slightly old bar located under some purple and red neon lights. To my left was a bare concrete area, and further in was a stage. It seemed like they were conducting checks on the footlights, and the lights shone mercilessly on Kagurazaka-senpai, who was on stage fiddling with her effect units. As for Chiaki, she was helping out in carrying the stands of the microphone. Both the girls were wearing short T-shirts that were nearly showing their navel, as well as miniskirts below. They were quite careless to be standing on a level above others in





that attire..... but it should be fine, right?

"Are all the members here? What? Not yet?"

A sweaty man with a bandanna on his head was yelling at Senpai from the side of the stage. Looks like he's the person-in-charge of the audio equipment. I quickly ran to the side of the stage.

"Young man, did you see her when you were above?"

As she asked me that, Senpai was looking downwards and focusing on the tasks at hand. She should be asking about Mafuyu. I shook my head in silence.

"I see."

Senpai's answer was rather uncaring.

However, Chiaki came running over hastily.

"Is Mafuyu not here yet? I'll give her a call."

"Ah, let me do it."

Tuning the drum set will probably be the most time-consuming task, right? I passed her my bass while thinking of that, and then I took out my phone as I walked out of the shop. I climbed up the winding stairs and back to the surface, and it was then that I felt like I could finally breathe.

But despite the numerous calls I made, Mafuyu didn't pick up any of them. I don't know if it was because of my harsh words in my voice mail that had made things worse, but she didn't even enable voice messages this time. My hand that was





holding onto the phone was trembling, and the disconnected tones were sliding down my throat as though I had accidentally swallowed some marbles in my mouth.

Is she really planning to not come here without even saying anything? Though I had no idea what she's pissed off at, but..... gimme a break!

What will Senpai and Chiaki think about this—

Something came to my mind suddenly. I opened up my wallet to fish out a name card that's inside of it, and made yet another call on my phone - I even keyed in the numbers wrong a few times during the process.

"..... Yes? This is Matsumura speaking."

That voice sounded as cold as ice. That woman said that she is the one in charge of taking care of Mafuyu. I recalled the glamorous mansion where Mafuyu lives in together with those fierce-looking Dobermans, and I unconsciously wiped the sweat off my palms with my jeans.

"U-Urm, I'm Hikawa, the person who visited the mansion a few days ago."

"Right. I am sorry for what happened back then. May I ask if it is something about our young lady?"

"Y-Yes. May I know if Mafuyu..... Mafuyu-san— Well, today's the rehearsal....."

"My mistress was squatting in front of the door with her guitar at noon. I could not bear to see her in that state, so I brought her back into the house—"

"Eh? T-Then where is she now?"





"She has locked herself in her room and is refusing to come out."

I was stunned for a while. I then collapsed butt-first onto the ground, and heaved a heavy sigh.

So she..... had planned on coming? But should I be at ease by that for now?

"Which means..... that it won't be possible for her to come down today?"

"She should be able to if I am to break open the door and cuff her up with handcuffs."

"T-That's not necessary. Please do not do that."

Hey you..... can you not say such scary things in such a calm manner?

"Pardon me for asking, but is tomorrow the actual performance of the band?"

"Hmm? Yeah."

"If that's the case—"

Miss Matsumura paused for a moment, as though she was thinking about how she should word her sentence.

"I am really sorry, but I may have to trouble one of you to make your way down to pick up my mistress. I will try to come up with ways to restrain her."

Restrain? And you're not even trying to convince her? Somehow, it feels like she's someone who will really tie Mafuyu up with ropes and such. Scary.





Which means— that it will be my responsibility to convince Mafuyu?

"..... Alright. Please do that."

"And that means it's just the three of us who are rehearsing today."

I went back to the basement and told them about the conversation I had on the phone. Senpai replied rather calmly with that sentence. But as for Chiaki, she was standing in front of the drum set and looked as though she had something stuck in her throat.

There were lots personnel around the stage - there's the staff of <Bright> in their blue uniform, the members of Hiroshi's band, as well as another group of performers who were slightly older than the rest of us. Everyone was busy ensuring that the lights and the audio system were working properly. Despite the air conditioning, the place was filled with an intense heat that will cause one to sweat even if they are just standing about and not moving.

"Young man, we don't have much time left, so start preparing! There's still people who will be rehearsing on stage after us, so stop dilly-dallying!"

I nodded my head and put on an expression that looked like I had just drank something really bitter. I then picked up my bass from its stand.

Mafuyu's not here, and I had no idea where I should be standing on the stage. When the four of us practices together, Senpai will always be standing directly in front of Chiaki. I'll be at Senpai's left, while Mafuyu will take her place on the right — that's how it should have been.

"Start with the drums. Hurry!"





The sound effects crew yelled angrily through the PA system. Chiaki began to tap out a sluggish set of sixteen beats with her feet, which forced me to focus my attention on the music.

"Gotta be kidding me! You're asking that sort of band to be the opening act?"

We could hear a furious shout just as we were done with our third song. I jumped in fright and turned around to look at the entrance of the lounge that is located to the left of the stage. Furukawa's hollering at Hiroshi.

The opening act — which means he's referring to us. Did we rub him the wrong way? The personnels present were all looking at the two of them from a distance away with troubled expressions on their face.

"I said that someone's not there, right?"

"What sort of bullshit excuse is that? We're talking about a rehearsal here, and she's not here!?! Oi! Kyouko!"

Furukawa pushed Hiroshi aside and climbed onto the stage. I reflectively retreated a step back, and nearly tripped on the wires on the floor.

"I've said this before, yeah? I don't care if it's your band, but if I'm not satisfied with your performance during the rehearsal, then you will not be getting on stage. Or do you think you're in the liberty of looking down on this just because it's a casual gig?"

Furukawa was as overbearing as a mad dog. Should our performance for today be unsatisfactory, we won't be allowed to take the stage - so they actually agreed on this





beforehand?

"I did agree to that....." Senpai placed her guitar down and wiped her sweat before continuing, "So? What do you want here?"

"Nothing! We can still joke about it if it's just your sounds that are lacking, but that's not all that we have here! It's like you're deliberately screwing things up!"

"I like Taisei the most~! 'Cause you'll always say the truth."

"Don't you try laughing it off!"

Furukawa pointed his index finger in front of Senpai's chest.

"With your skills, you should be able make up for the missing person during the performance, right? But you're just there playing your solo leisurely!"

"The person who's not here today will definitely be here tomorrow."

"You guys quarreled, right? I've just found out about it. What will you do if she doesn't come down tomorrow? Since she's not here now, you should have gone up on stage with the mindset that she will not be here tomorrow!"

"No way."

Senpai pushed Furukawa away with force. I could feel that Hiroshi, who's behind me, was forcing himself to swallow the words that were about to come out of his mouth. That applies to me as well - I could not say anything at all.

"I don't even want to consider the possibility of her not coming down tomorrow."





"What are you saying.....?"

"So..... even though I'm letting Hiroshi down, we won't be going on stage if she doesn't come down tomorrow."

"Oi! Kyouko! Don't be so rash—"

Furukawa turned his head around and interrupted Hiroshi's words.

"Hiroshi, don't you step into this!" He then turned back to face Senpai, "Since you put it that way, then fine! Just carry on with your bullshit rehearsal as you please! I'll be going out for now as I have no intention of listening to something that'll cause my ears to rot! Tell me when you guys are done!"

Furukawa then pushed the onlookers aside and walked past the shop in huge strides. He then pushed open the soundproof door with his shoulders and stormed out of the place.

The stagnant and heavy silence continued on for a long while.

"..... Senpai....."

Chiaki squeezed out her voice from behind the drums.

"Sorry, I'm always deciding things by myself..... But can you guys go along with me?"

Chiaki directed her gaze at me, but I lacked the courage to accept them, so I lowered my head to look at the messy wires beneath me instead. The footlights were blinding me.





"Sorry, but we want to continue with our rehearsal."

Senpai shouted in the direction of the PA console.

The next piece was my song, and the bass is the part that leads the melody. Despite so, it's like my fingers were stuck on the strings of my bass - they could not move.

If Mafuyu really doesn't come down tomorrow.....

That's something that I am unwilling to consider for even a second.

But she really did not come down. Even after the sun had circled the Earth once, and time had fast-forwarded to the final rehearsal that's on the very same day of the the performance, Mafuyu didn't appear.

The next day—

It's four in the afternoon. My phone rang - it's from Chiaki. I had just arrived at <Bright>, and was parking my bicycle at the corner of the parking area. I hastily took out the handphone from the back-pocket of my jeans.

"Yes? Something happened?"

Even before Chiaki spoke, I already had a bad feeling about all this.

"Mafuyu..... they said Mafuyu has disappeared!"

Chiaki panted into the phone.





"Wha....."

Shaaa All I heard was something scrapping against the trunks of my jeans. For a long while, my mind was blanked out. I did not even realize that my bicycle had fallen on the ground and the spinning wheels were dirtying my shoes.

"Where are you now? At Mafuyu's house?"

"Mmm. It's Miss Matsumura who told me about it."

Chiaki was tasked with picking Mafuyu up from her house. We planned to borrow Hiroshi's drum set for the actual performance, so we asked Chiaki to help with the transportation of the drum set, they are to pick up Mafuyu from her house on the way - or that's what we had planned.

But Mafuyu disappeared?

"Disappeared..... what's going on there?"

"It seems like..... she has ran away from home again."

Oh, I see. Running away from home. Again. I could suddenly feel my brain being in a surprisingly calm state — so Mafuyu disappeared yet again without saying anything.

Then..... what to do?

"..... What should we do?"

Chiaki repeated my thoughts with a voice that was close to crying.





"Just come down to <Bright> for now. It's not like you can do much there. Hiroshi and his drummer are with you, right? They have to rehearse as well."

Somehow, my voice sounded like it's coming from an old recording.

After the call was cut off, I began to think of how I should break the news to Senpai and Furukawa.

Mafuyu disappeared. I did not manage to convey my words into her heart. *'Come up with something by yourself'* — the words of Senpai were reverberating in my ears yet again. But did I try doing anything at all? All I had done was look on from the sides as the events flowed by me, just like how I've always been. I'm actually the person who's standing closest to Mafuyu, at a place where I could touch her just by stretching out my arms.....

"And so, what do you guys wanna do?" Furukawa asked.

I walked down to the basement and reported the contents of Chiaki's call to Furukawa as well as Senpai, who was adjusting the balance of the microphone stand. That's the first sentence I heard when I was done informing them. The staff in blue shirts were walking all over the stage, and the sounds of the instruments streaked through the burning air.

What should we do? He's actually asking us what we want to do? Why is he asking us that sort of question!? I was well aware that I was in a anxious and irritated state.

Mafuyu's not coming. Do you even need to ask? Just hurry up and kick us off the stage! Senpai, you too! Tell him that we are unable to perform today!





However, Furukawa said nothing, and he just stared at Senpai instead. Senpai looked at him and said,

"It's still three hours till the actual performance."

"Are you a moron!?"

Furukawa asked indignantly, and I felt the same way as well. Is Senpai a moron?

"We've planned for a rehearsal for today as well! What will you do if she doesn't come despite you guys waited for her? It will be really troublesome for us if we are informed at the very last minute that we'll have to take the stage at an earlier time!"

Then you might as well free us from our misery! Why are you asking things like "What will we do"? I don't get him at all.

"Taisei, I know that. But even so—"

Kagurazaka-senpai pressed the microphone hard into her chest. I could hear a shrill feedback coming from the monitor speakers.

"I still want to wait. Can I? I'll do anything that I can to make it up to you for the troubles that we've given you."

"It's not about you making it up to us or not! I don't give a damn about whether that last member of yours is coming or not! At a time like this, you should be prepared to take the stage with just the three of you, yeah? I can spare more time for you guys to practice, and it will be okay even if you want to change the songs that you'll be performing! I really have no idea why you're so insistent on her!"

"But..... This is not just my band. So I can't do that."





I could clearly see the cowardice in Senpai's eyes as she was saying that. The fearless Kagurazaka-senpai was actually acting all timid? I could hardly believe it.

I already had a bad premonition about it on the night of our training camp. But even so, with the truth placed right before my very eyes, I was so depressed that I could hardly breathe.

This person here — she had gradually lost all of her bandmates because of things like this.

And that's why she's right now is afraid of losing Mafuyu. She's afraid of losing feketerigó.

I couldn't bear to see Senpai in a state like this. However, I was totally helpless—

There was a sudden gush of wind in the livehouse. Furukawa and I turned our head backwards at the same time, and saw Chiaki rushing in after she pushed the door open. Hiroshi and the others that's behind her were carrying the drums that's wrapped up in cloths.

"Nao, Senpai!"

Chiaki ran towards us. Her eyes were red and puffy from her tears. There were stains of her sweat that's remaining on her white colored shirt with our band logo spray-painted on it.

"Mafuyu, she d-disappeared again....."

Chiaki could speak no further. She grabbed hold of the legs of the microphone stand, and lowered her head to catch her breath. I could clearly remember the angry





expression on her face that time. Mafuyu's guitar and Chiaki's drums were perfectly synchronized - just like the arms and legs of a person, or an ingenious canon that goes on and on forever. The scene of the training camp appeared vividly before me.

But despite all that, Mafuyu has disappeared. Without leaving behind a single word.

What's with this? Just what are we to Mafuyu? That's not how things should have ended! We've come so far, so how can we end things like this?

"Hiroshi, I'm really sorry for the wasted trip."

Senpai said that to Hiroshi when she saw him moving the drums up onto the stage.

"That's nothing! But did you guys manage to contact the girl?"

Chiaki and I both shook our heads. Since waking up in the morning, I had called Mafuyu in one hour intervals without putting much hope into it, and all I heard were the cold mechanical replies of "Sorry, the number you have just dialed is not reachable" and etc.

"Comrade Ebisawa..... may be making her way down here....."

Senpai murmured in a feeble voice, which was almost swallowed up by the noise produced by the staff around us. That's really what she believes? Why is she not giving up on it?

"Why are you still insisting on this?"

Upon hearing the question from Hiroshi, Senpai showed a smile that's like the dusk.

"Because feketerigó is a band for the four of us."





I couldn't stare at that smile of hers, so I turned my face away. Chiaki, who was looking at the floor this whole time, slowly raised her head up.

Just then, I saw the band logo that's printed around the chest area of Chiaki's T-shirt.

There was a small black silhouette of a bird perched on the "g" of "feketerigó".

"That's....."

Chiaki squeezed a smile and rubbed her eyes when she noticed my gaze.

"I-I made a lot of them. There's one for Nao..... and one for Mafuyu too."

"..... A bird?"

"Eh? Ah, you mean this? Senpai designed it."

So that was indeed the shape of a bird.

The feathers from its head to its tail were all black - aside from the yellow at its beak. I knew that bird, but I've only seen it on pictures before. It's a bird that we shouldn't be able to find in this country, but I do know that bird. Why?

I turned my head to look at Senpai. Our eyes met.

"I didn't tell you this? That's Hungarian. "fekete" means "black", while "rigó" means bird. Put them together, and you have blackbird."

I couldn't breath all of a sudden. The sounds in the livehouse were getting further and further away from me. At the same time, the words that Senpai said back then, as





well as the expression on Mafuyu's face - they were becoming clearer and clearer in my mind.

"You like this song?"

And Mafuyu nodded in response to that question.

Blackbird. Senpai doesn't know, and Chiaki doesn't know either. It's only Mafuyu and I who know the real significance behind that song - the name of the band decided by Mafuyu; the very first song that tied the both of us played together, back at the misty junkyard at dawn.

feketerigó—

Why did she come up with that name? Why did Mafuyu and I came up with the same name?

"— Young man?"

Senpai's voice pulled me back into the difficult-to-breath atmosphere that's in the livehouse. The voice of the people conversing; the sounds of footsteps and breathing; the clashing of the cymbals; the sounds of the impact of glass; the feedback from the microphones. The sounds around me were the same as before I sank myself into my sea of memories, but there's one sound that was not around before.

The sound of my heartbeat.

I fumbled for my phone that's in the back-pocket of my jeans, and ran towards the entrance of the livehouse. I squeezed horizontally through the small opening of the door, and sprinted up the narrow and dark staircase. Despite me hearing the sounds of someone chasing behind me, I had no time to stop in my tracks to check. When I





reached the parking lot, I immediately dialed Miss Matsumura's number.

"..... Yes? This is Matsumura speaking."

"Urm, I'm Hikawa. There's something..... that I'd like to ask you."

Calm down, and speak properly - I kept reminding myself of that.

"There's something that I'd like to confirm. Mafuyu..... Mafuyu-san..... did she— "

"Yes?"

"— Did she bring her guitar along with her?"

And a two seconds of silence.

"Please hold on, and do not disconnect the call. I will confirm that right now."

I prayed hard as I waited for Miss Matsumura's reply. If Mafuyu had brought along her guitar when she left her house—

"Sorry for making you wait. I did not locate mistress' guitar in her room. I have searched in all other possible places as well, but I did not see it. She should have taken it with her."

"R-Right!"

My answer sounded like I was coughing. We're still linked to each other — the melody that's tying us together is still not broken yet. Just as I was about to thank her and end the call, Miss Matsumura continued,





"And also....."

"Eh?"

"We are now currently locating the whereabouts of my mistress. The cellphone which my mistress possess is embedded with GPS tracking capabilities."

"What does that do?"

"We can pinpoint the location of the phone via satellite."

Ah..... I think I've heard something like that before. Oh right, Mafuyu's high-end phone is custom-made for her by the request of her ever-doting father, so it's not impossible for him to have activated a service like that.

"Which means..... you already know where she is?"

"No. We began tracing her right after we found out that my mistress had disappeared. We located her position at three in the afternoon. However, it seems like she changed the settings of her phone, and we could no longer detect any signal from it ever since."

I lowered my head in dejection. She didn't even know how to save the numbers in her phone not too long ago! Damn!

"..... I see. But....."

"But that is better than nothing."

Miss Matsumura then told me the position of Mafuyu two hours ago. I opened up the map in my mind..... No, can't do. I can't know where she is just from the address





alone.

"I will contact you should there be any new developments. Please give her a slap in my place should you find our young lady before we do."

"Ah, a-alright. Thank you very much."

I quickly ended the call.

"..... Young man? Is there something—"

I turned my head around. Senpai, who was chasing me earlier, was standing on the stairs that leads to the basement. Chiaki was right behind her as well.

"It seems like Mafuyu has brought her guitar along with her."

The expressions on Senpai and Chiaki's face softened a little when they heard that. Indeed. If she brought her guitar along with her, then there's still a chance. Moreover, she's carrying her handphone along—

Her handphone? Why did she take her handphone with her? For what purpose?

I looked at the phone that's in my hand. Shit! I'm an idiot for not noticing the calls earlier, and it's from Mafuyu as well. The time of the call is— five in the afternoon, which means not too long ago, back when I was still in the basement. Damn! Why did we always miss each other? No, hold on — there's a message in my voice mail. I pressed the button with my trembling fingers to play its content.

Noise — the noise of the wind as well as exhaust of vehicles? There's also a loud *garagara* sound that I am hearing. Under the uneasy looks of Senpai and Chiaki, the speakers continued to pour out those stuttering sounds.





"..... It's me. I'm sorry."

It's Mafuyu. It's..... Mafuyu's voice.

"..... I feel really lost. Chiaki said she'd be picking me up, but I had no idea what to do, so I ran away. Because I'm starting to hesitate once more."

She's hesitating. Hesitating about whether to come here? I gripped hard on the phone with my sweating palms, so as not to miss a single word that Mafuyu says.

"But..... I'm sorry. As expected..... I can't go there."

I suppressed my urge to yell with all my might.

"Since I've done such things, I can no longer return to everyone's side..... Even without me by your side, Naomi..... should be okay with that, right? Since there's Kyouko, and there's Chiaki....."

What the heck is Mafuyu talking about? Don't give me that crap! Everyone's waiting for her! Everything will not start without her - why can't she just understand that? Its it because it's something that cannot be conveyed with just words alone?

"Moreover..... it's getting harder and harder for me to walk, and my right hand..... can no longer move at all. Even if I go there..... I'll just be a burden to everyone, so..... I'm sorry."

The voice message ended just like that. I could almost shatter my phone with my grip. Chiaki was looking at me from the side with a frightened expression.

Your right hand can no longer move? So she can't play the guitar even if she's here? I





originally thought that Mafuyu would definitely get it if we are to play together on the same stage, but she can't play the guitar?

"Nao, are you alright? Is that..... from Mafuyu?"

I bit hard on my lips and nodded my head.

"What did she say?"

"She said that she can't come. That her right hand is unable to move right now, and she'll only be a burden to us if she's here."

Even I felt like crying when I saw Chiaki becoming more and more depressed. What's with all this? Why? Why have things turned out like this?

"..... And then? What are you planning to do, young man?"

I raised my head, and saw Senpai putting on a silent expression that looked like the aftermath of a downpour.

"What else? To find Mafuyu, of course!"

I may not be able to find her, and I may not be able to make it to the performance, but those things don't matter to me at all. We are the blackbird, and Mafuyu's the right wing. In order to fly, we'll definitely have to find her — regardless of whether she can play the guitar or not.

I played Mafuyu's voice message repeatedly in an attempt to sift out the clues hidden among the noise that's behind her voice. There should be some clues that can lead me to Mafuyu. I must find her, and then—





Then what? For the things can cannot be conveyed using words, what should I use in replacement to link them together once more? What must I do so that I can once again find the thing that links us together?

The thing that connects us together—

Music.

Something clicked in my mind. I recalled what I had heard. There's some other noise aside from Mafuyu's painful words that was attracting my attention — right, it's music. The canon of the bells coming from a place far, far away.

Dvořák.

"..... Nao? What's wrong?"

I shifted my gaze away from Chiaki's face to Senpai.

"Senpai..... you said before that you'd help me as long as I asked?"

Senpai nodded with a light smile on her face - as though she was saying: "I've been waiting for that line for a long time".

"But..... I think it will be a really unreasonable request....."

"I'll be the one to judge that - not you, young man."

Yeah. I have such an impressive person next to me, so why didn't I ask for her help earlier? When she was done listening to what I had in mind, the expression on her face remained unchanged. She just grabbed me by my hand and looked at my watch.





"We have less than two hours left. I can't make a trip back home."

"S-So you can't do it—?"

"Anything is fine as long as it's by The Eagles?"

I nodded my head repeatedly after dazing out for a second. That means she's willing to help? But can it really be done? I asked myself that, and thought that it was really just—

Senpai swung her hair and ran off. She then disappeared in the depths of the parking lot before long. Next, was the sounds of the engine fading away in the blink of an eye. She's just too quick with her movements.

"What's going on? What was that just now? Where did Senpai go?"

"Sorry Chiaki, but there's no time to explain to you right now." I placed both of my hands on her shoulders and continued, "We may not have the time to rehearse, so we'll have to leave all the preparation work in your hands..... Sorry, but can you stay here and do that?"

Chiaki opened her teary eyes wide. She then said,

"..... You're going to find Mafuyu?"

"Mmm. I don't know if I can make it in time, but I'll definitely bring her back."

"I got it."

Chiaki nodded.





"You must definitely find Mafuyu. I have lots of things that I want to scold her about."

I nodded in return.

I then counted out the things that had to be done. Can I really find Mafuyu with that method? I don't know. But I could think of nothing else, so I could only try. We have just under two hours before our performance - I raised my head to look at the sky that was filled with clouds.

I must definitely find her — I must find Mafuyu who exists under the same sky as me.





Chapter 10

Kiss it Goodbye



.....Idiot. You're an Idiot!





When I returned to the basement, I sprinted past the staff and ran towards the PA console. I then spoke to Hiroshi, who was standing on the side. "Sorry, but can I ask a favor from you?"

Hiroshi showed an expression of "Huh?" when he was done listening to my request. However, the person-in-charge of the audio system with a bandanna on his head seemed to have understood what I wanted immediately. He rapped at the equipment and asked,

"So all you need is the time difference between the sounds?"

"Urm, yes. If possible..... be as accurate as you can."

"Pass me the source. I'll take a look."

"Oi, hold on! I'm at a loss here!"

"It won't matter even if you don't get it!"

The guy took my phone and recorded Mafuyu's message swiftly.

"—Oh? That's quite an embarrassing confession that we have here..... Hey lad, it's not good to make a girl cry."

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

I totally forgot about it - I actually allowed an unknown man to listen to the Mafuyu's painful words. But then, now's not the time to be thinking about those things. Hiroshi grabbed me by my hand just as I was about to rush towards the exit.

"Oi! You still haven't had your rehearsal yet, so where do you think you're going?"





Also, why has Kyouko disappeared as well?"

"I'm going to find Mafuyu right now! Hurry up and let me go!"

"You know where she is?"

"I'm currently calculating her position. Lad, hurry up and move! You still have to get a map, right?" The bandanna guy interrupted.

"I'm really sorry! I'll definitely be back before the concert begins!"

I exchanged sights briefly with Chiaki, who was at the drum set. I then flew towards the door. Thank god Furukawa's at the resting area. He'll definitely go into a rage if he knew we were pinning our hopes on something as silly as this.

However, we had no other option but to do that. All of this may be for nothing, and we may not be able to get back the wing that's been torn off - but even so, we can't just succumb ourselves to that fate without doing anything.

I pedaled hard on my bicycle, and made my way to the neighboring town - the train station that's closest to my house. I stormed into the stationary store to get myself the largest scale map I could find, a long ruler and a compass. I took a look at the clock in the store before I left - it's already five forty-five. The dusk of summer was slowly swallowed up by the time. And next is— hmmm..... should be the district office. Wait, why the district office again!? I couldn't help but recall the time Mafuyu and I ran away from home together. The idea I had came up with back then was pretty stupid. I took out my phone and connected myself to the website of the district office.





..... Hold on. Which number should I call? I stopped pedaling and parked my bicycle on the walkway next to the railways, and was at a lost of what to do. Come to think of it, I don't even know how I should call that thing they play every evening at five!

There's not much time left, and I'll only be wasting more time should I panic without doing anything. I dialed the number of the district office.

"Urm, good evening, I'd like to inquire about something. It's about Dvořák's music..... the song that is played everyday when it hits five in the evening....."

When I recalled it much later, it was really stupid of me to ask the question in that manner. I must have caused a lot of confusion to the operator who belonged to the general division. Dvořák's music..... who would have understood that?

My call was diverted a few times to various divisions, where it finally reached the civil defense.

"You mean that music? That's the radio broadcasting for disaster prevention!"

It seems like the person on the other side of the phone was an old civil servant.

"Should things like an earthquake or fires happen, we'll do an emergency broadcast via those things! The thing that rings at five everyday is not a chime, but a testing broadcast."

Eh? So that's the truth behind that? I never knew that.....

"Uhh..... urm, then..... may I know where those speakers are situated in the city?"

My heart nearly sank to the floor when I heard his reply.





"Where huh.....? Over forty different locations?"

"Forty....."

I was that close to fainting, but I managed to continue,

"Can you please tell me..... the location of all the speakers?"

All the fire stations in the city, nearly all the public schools, as well as the parks. I spread out the map on the divider on the roadside and marked out all the locations of the speakers that the civil servant had told me. I was getting irritated when I was about halfway into the task. I never thought that there would be so many. Damn, it's about to reach six o'clock.

Just then, my phone rang.

"Nao? It's me. The mister at the PA has crunched out the numbers, and he asked me to inform you about it."

"But why you—" Damn, I'm stupid. There's no other way he could have contacted me aside from Chiaki! It's my fault for not leaving behind my contact number when I left in a hurry. After I was done noting down the three digits on the side of the map, Chiaki asked,

"Right, what are these numbers for? Is there really a way for us to locate Mafuyu? It's already so late—"

"I don't know, but....."





I took out my compass. Indeed, there isn't much time left. As I gathered my thoughts, I clamped my phone between my ears and my shoulders, and explained,

"At the current temperature, the speed of sound through the air is about 348 meters per second."

"..... What?"

"In the voice message, I could hear the sound of the chimes after Mafuyu's voice fades off. That chime will ring everyday at five."

I forgot when it was, but I had listened to Dvořák with Mafuyu before - the canon of the second movement of <New World Symphony> that was created via the absolute limits of the speed of sound. I was really thankful to Ebichiri's habit of over-doting on his daughter — the ordinary phones would definitely be unable to pick up the broadcasts in the city that clearly. I have that high-end phone to thank for that.

"All the speakers in the city will play at the exact same time. So that means that the sounds from the further speakers will arrive to you slower, right? All I need to do is see the time lag between the chimes, then multiply it by the speed of sound, which is 348 meters. That will allow me to know roughly how far away Mafuyu is from the speakers. There's three separate chimes in the voice message which arrived at different times, so—"

"Y-You can know where she is just from that alone? But the time between each chimes is so short..... a-and..... there should be a lot of speakers as well, right?"

"Mmm. So the thing that's left is for me to believe in Mafuyu."

I drew circles after circles on the map with my compass. Of course, there'll be huge margins of errors since my calculations are based on the estimated time difference as





well as the speed of sound, so I wasn't that lucky to get a precise spot on the map where there were three circles overlapping at the same time. But even so, there was still a ray of hope - the intersection between those circles and that line.

"..... To believe in her?"

"Because she brought her guitar out with her, and she said she was at a loss of whether to meet us or not."

Aside from that, there's also the last detected location of Mafuyu that Miss Matsumura told me.

"But what's the point in knowing that? The information is already two hours old!"

"So what I am saying is - I am assuming that she is heading directly towards the livehouse right after she ran away from home."

There's no other option but for me to believe in that.

Starting from Mafuyu's house, I used my finger to trace out the route along the national highway, which goes north. The last detected position of Mafuyu happened to be in that direction as well.

My finger stopped at a certain place that's in one of the intersection of the circles that I drew. I could see a blue line that transversed the map horizontally - it's a river.

Would that be the place where Mafuyu is at? If she's planning to follow that path to make her way to the neighboring city, then it makes sense for her to walk north all the way to the river, then continue along the riverbed where it would lead her to the north-east direction—





That's right. Regardless of how good the receivers of her phone are, in order to hear the chimes that clearly, she will have to be in a place where there's no objects around her that's blocking the path of the sounds, right?

Everything makes sense if she's at the river side.

I hung up the call, and replayed Mafuyu's voice message. Can I hear the sounds of the water that will confirm my hypothesis? Sadly, the sounds picked up by the receiver were too faint for me to make much of it, and so everything will boil down to luck. In any case, it's something that happened over one hour ago. She may be tired from all the walking, and is now resting at a certain place. Or, she might still be on her way from her house to the livehouse.

My only option is to believe in the latter.

After stuffing the map and my phone into my pocket, I released the kickstand of my bicycle in preparation to continue my search.

As I rode along the narrow road that had no sidewalks, I was constantly overtaken by the cars that sped past me. By then, the dark clouds in the sky were slowly dispersing, and the setting sun of summer was peeking diagonally downwards onto me. The sun in the west was bright red color, just like that of blood.

I was already sweating all over my body when I could see the dikes of the river. I pushed my bicycle up the slopes and took in huge gulps of air that was blowing against my face.

At the bottom of the grassy slope was the river that seemed to stretch endlessly. The river was narrower due to the hot weather, and it was dyed by the colors of the sunset.





I took out my map and confirmed that I was heading upstream. Problem is, will I really be able to find her? On the map, the area where the three circles overlap is nothing more than just a triangle that's a few centimeters wide, but in actual fact, that area is extremely big. I could easily see people lying along the riverside, as well as people walking their dogs, and others training on badminton. Upon seeing all that, I couldn't help but think - wouldn't it be great if the world were to disappear in the dusk, leaving behind just Mafuyu and I.

If that were the case, I'd definitely be able to find her.

The sweat on my body was gradually drying off, and the winds were beginning to feel a little cold. My left hand was still grabbing onto the map, while my legs had never once stopped pedaling.

There aren't many significant landmarks along the riverside - there's only the metalwork factory located right below the dikes. I was about to reach the area of the triangle marked on the map. The river before me suddenly became wide. Since I was riding along the side of the river, I was forced to do a detour by making a large turn. To my left, I could see a baseball pitch and a football field going past me.

When I cycled through the turn and got back to the riverside again, I stopped my bicycle at a place where there was grass all around me. As I looked at the riverbank that was filled with pebbles, I was overwhelmed by a sudden surge of fatigue. I sat down on the grassy slope.

It should be somewhere around here, right? My mind was blanked out by the winds that blew past me. The cool grassland beneath me instantly absorbed the heat from my body due to my vigorous motion.

I only have an hour left. Seems like I won't be able to find her. The real world is hopelessly large, while I am so insignificantly tiny - I felt like crying. With the bonds





between the two people gone, there's no way that they'll be able to meet each other again. All that's left is the darkness of the night that's silently but surely creeping up on me.

It will no longer return - the thing that ties everything about Mafuyu and I will never ever return to me again.

I took out my phone and confirmed the time of the voice message. It's already too late for me to do anything, but I should at least give Mafuyu a call one more time. But all I heard was the hollow sounds of the dialing tone landing onto the grassland drip by drip. I buried my face in between my knees in depression - the hand that I was holding the phone with dropped its way onto the ground. It seemed like the dialing tone was repeatedly slicing my arm with each ring as I counted the number of rings.

The thing that had once bonded Mafuyu and I together—

Music.

Music— I heard it.

I raised my head slowly, and for a moment I thought that it was just my hallucination. I listened intently to the winds that were breezing past the surface of the river, and ignored the inanimate electronic sound that was coming off endlessly from my palm. I began to seek the faint sound.

There really is the sound of music - I could really hear it. I slid down the grassy slope and stood on the exposed soil on the riverbank. I then closed my eyes and listened intently to the sounds of a guitar. The constant G open chords sounded just like the heartbeats of a bird, and the melody that's riding on it was like the eyes of the bird that were looking through the darkness of the night.





I had heard that song before. It's the first song that tied the two of us together.

<Blackbird>.

I began to sprint wildly on the soil - before the song stopped playing, and before the sun sets. I ran into the grass patch and went against the flow of the music to seek its source. On the way, I pried open countless Canada goldenrod and had even stepped on their stems.

My views widened up suddenly when I reached the end of the patch of weed. The river had already chewed up the afterglows of the settling sun and was washing it away silently. The night winds were gently flowing through my hair. I looked around in an attempt to seek that song. The lights had gradually disappeared and everything around me was sinking into the deep blue hues of the night.

Just then, a flash of light streaked past the corners of my eyes.

It's a place upstream that's far away from me - a dune that is formed from the alluvium of the river. There's a bunch of maroon hair that's glittering brightly with a gold brilliance under the last remaining rays of the settling sun.

I kicked aside the gravel next to my feet and rushed upstream.

"— Mafuyu!"

The person who was squatting on the ground and staring at the surface of the river suddenly raised her head when she heard my voice - it's Mafuyu alright. The shadow of her guitar case had stretched really far in the direction upstream. She was grabbing onto her handphone tightly with her hand, which was giving off the polyphonic ringtone of <Blackbird>.





"..... Why?"

Mafuyu's eyes were opened wide from her surprise. She mumbled as she stared at me sprinting towards her.

"Why..... are you here?"

I swallowed my saliva as I attempted to catch my breath. With my back bent down and my hands on my knees, I replied,

"..... Why else!? To find you, of course!"

Tears reappeared on Mafuyu's pair of reddish eyes.

"..... Why are you looking for me? You idiot!"

I don't know if I should be angry or dumbfounded, or if I should just laugh instead. In the end, I stretched my hand out towards her.

"..... Let's go! Everyone's waiting for you..... We'll be going on stage at seven."

Mafuyu hugged her knees and shook her head fervently.

"I can't go."

"Why!?"

"Because..... I went on a disappearing act, so I no longer have the right to go back. Everyone will just be troubled even if I'm around, right?"





I lifted my head to look at the sky that was slowly dyed in the colors of the night. It won't do for me to convey them with just words alone. But even so—

I grabbed onto Mafuyu's right hand, which she had buried her fingers into the sand. Mafuyu looked up in surprise.

"How would you feel if your right hand was to say that to you as well?"

"Wh.....at?"

"We'll feel really troubled if you're not around! It's that simple. If you don't return to us, we won't be able to play any song at all."

"But..... my hand is currently....."

"That doesn't matter! Can you stand? Here, hold on to my shoulder."

"W-Wait!"

I propped Mafuyu up forcibly.

"If you can't play using your hand, then use your teeth to play! If you can't do that as well, then get on the stage and dance! We're a band! And think about who's the one who gave the band its name!"

"Don't decide that by yourself!" Mafuyu's eyes were about to sink to the bottom of the sea. "Even if..... even if I'm around, there's nothing that I can do! I can't even play the guitar—"

"Things like that don't matter at all! Even if you can't play the guitar now, there's still the piano!"





I grabbed Mafuyu hard on her right wrist.

"What are you talking about?"

"It won't do if Mafuyu's not around! Don't you get it!?"

"I don't!"

Mafuyu's tears fell towards the ground along with her words.

"Didn't I promise you before our training camp? I've gambled my whole life on that, you know? That's why I said things like I'd listen to anything you say if you can't find it. You also agreed to it back then, right? If that's the case, then don't run away!"

I had no idea what I was saying.

"And I promise you that you'll definitely get it this time when you reach the live house. It's okay even if you can't play the guitar. Just stand at the side of the stage and listen to us play. If you still don't get it after that, then I'll be at your beck and call - I don't care if you want me to take a hat and collect money for you for the rest of my life. So—"

Just then, I remembered what Miss Maki said to me before. Why am I feeling so troubled when Mafuyu's not around? It's because I—

"Actually..... I planned to live out the three years of my high-school life by not participating in any clubs, and just spend my days listening to CDs. But because of Mafuyu's appearance..... because I hoped to keep you by my side, I purchased my bass, modified it and practiced on it. But you— you're always like this. Don't just disappear like that!"





It's because of Mafuyu's appearance, and because I hoped to keep her by my side. I already went so far and did all these things. However, the words in my mouth were swallowed up by the burning breathes in my throat.

Mafuyu walked up to me with her unsteady steps and grabbed me on my shoulders. She lifted her head and looked at me with her shimmering eyes, before shifting her gaze onto somewhere around my upper arm. She said with a hoarse voice,

"..... Idiot. You're an idiot!"

"Just let me be one! Can you walk?"

Even though her gaze was still fixed on my arms, she nodded her head.

We cycled along the bicycle track upstream. I could feel Mafuyu's body heat on my back, and both of her arms were wrapped around my waist. The pedals were getting heavier and heavier, while the skies were becoming darker with each passing distance. The throbbing from just now had not died down totally yet. I dared not look at the time at all. As I gripped hard onto the handlebars, I looked at the two arms that were interlocked around my waist from time to time, so as to make sure that Mafuyu's still by my side.

Mafuyu's right here, And now, I am bringing her there.

But that's all there is to it - she's only 'here', just like her right fingers. It's just a physical existence. The blood that's pumped could not reach her, so she couldn't move.





I can't let things end like that. You can't consider this a band. If so—

Senpai and I— can we make it in time?

I don't know. All I knew was I could feel the presence of her breaths blowing on my ears. I took another firm grip on the handlebars which were wet from my sweat, and transferred more strength into my feet.

The sky was already totally dark when we reached <Bright>. The windows on the first floor as well as the entrance of the staircase which leads to the basement were lit with bright neon lights. The place was particularly eye-catching compared to the quiet and relatively dark residential area in which it is situated in. There are some people hanging around the neon lights - they should be the viewers who are waiting for the performance to begin? I parked my bicycle in the corner of the parking lot that was already filled with cars, before taking a glance at the clock in the office. It's already seven ten. We didn't make it in time. Has the concert already begun?

"Are your legs okay?"

"I-I can walk," Mafuyu leaped off the backseat and stood on the gravel ground.

We walked by the viewers that had gathered here. Just as we were about to head down the stairs, Mafuyu suddenly stopped in her tracks and began to hesitate yet again. I grabbed her by her hands.

"Quickly!"

"But..... It's already....."

Already what!? Chiaki's still waiting for us! It's because I told her that I'd definitely bring Mafuyu back. I walked down the stairs briskly. There's a small table situated at





the turn, and the staff was there selling tickets for the concert. "Ah! The two of you.....!" One of the staff was about to call out to us, so I shouted, "We're one of the performers!" I then pulled Mafuyu by her hands and continued running downwards.

When I pushed open the heavy soundproof door located at the end of the flight of stairs, a series of blinding and scattered rays as well as an intense bout of penetrative rhythm came lunging onto me.

As we stepped inside, Mafuyu and I were immediately cut off from the outside world by the door behind us. I could see the audience moving along to the rhythm amid the dense hot air around us. There's probably about a hundred people there..... no, maybe more? And the person in front of the crowd who's bathed in the colorful spotlights and going all out while drenched in her sweat was—

"..... Chiaki?"

It took me a lot of effort to hear the Mafuyu's whispers. Right, that person is Chiaki. The dancing white drum sticks were etching out beautiful and cruel arcs in the air, just like a whip. I could faintly see Chiaki's burning face amid the gold and white shimmers of the golden cymbals. Beneath the constant shuffles of the light cymbals was the rhythm of the bass drum that seemed to make its way right into our hearts, and even up to our throats.

And then—

Chiaki saw me.

No, she's not looking at me. Somehow, I clearly knew—

She's looking at Mafuyu.





The beats suddenly changed. It's a provoking rhythm in semi-quavers that climbed up the scales in a flash before diving all the way down. That caused a stir among the audiences who was itching for more.

"That's....." Mafuyu's voice was a little hoarse.

I too knew what it was. <He Man Woman Hater> - it's the song that Mafuyu and Chiaki used to duel against each other for over ten minutes, so much so that it felt like they were slashing each other away. Mafuyu was grabbing on my arm with her left hand, and it seemed to be twitching. She was searching for the nonexistent set of six strings, so as to be able to answer the call of Chiaki.

"Let's go. Chiaki's calling us."

We took a route along the wall at the side of the livehouse and brushed against the backs of the crowd as we made our way towards the stage. We walked into the resting area after locating the door that leads to it - though it is called a resting area, it just nothing more than a passage that leads to the emergency exit, with a few cabinets placed along it. There's a few guys who had already changed into their attire. They were standing shoulders to shoulders with each other, and ready to take the stage at any moment. Right when he saw me, Furukawa grabbed me by my shoulder and slammed me against the wall.

"Oi! Taisei!" Hiroshi was about to stop him, but his arms were brushed away by Furukawa. Furukawa pulled close to me while grabbing me by my collar. The back of my head was hurting from the impact against the wall, and somehow his voice seemed to be especially piercing.

"Quit fooling around, you bastard! What time do you think it is now?"

"..... Sorry....."





"Why the heck are you apologizing to me? You should be apologizing to your drummer instead! She's been holding on all the way till now with her solo performance!"

I looked at the stage that was under the merciless rays of the spotlights from my position on the side. Chiaki — she was stirring up the atmosphere of the place by constantly moving her arms as though they were about to snap off. By herself.

Chiaki did it all alone.

"Urm, may I know..... where Kagurazaka-senpai is?"

"That's what I wanna know! Where did she run off to?"

She's not here - that means Senpai didn't manage to make it in time? The piercing tones of the open-rimshot came from the stage, and the descending sounds of the bass drum were slowly fading away. The final note of the drumming performance was burrowed in the cheers from the audiences below. Chiaki twirled her drum sticks in her hands in response to the cheers given to her, and stood up wobbly at the same time. As though there's an invisible string leashed around her neck, she walked unsteadily towards the side of the stage and collapsed into my chest.

"..... Nao, you're— so— slow—"

"..... Sorry....."

"And I want to scold Mafuyu a lot!" Despite her lying limply on my chest, Chiaki shot a fierce glare at Mafuyu. Mafuyu shrunk herself to the side and removed the guitar case that was on her shoulder.





"In any case, let me have a drink first!"

Chiaki then accepted the bottled water offered by Hiroshi and cleared it all in a flash. The flush on her face was nowhere near receding, but she was already looking back at the stage anxiously.

"What are you planning to do?"

"Hold on till Senpai returns, of course!"

"Just give up already!" Furukawa said that from beside me. "You've managed to stir up the audience with your solo performance. You've done all you could already."

"I don't want to!" Chiaki rejected him immediately. "Mafuyu, go prepare yourself too, quickly! Senpai will definitely make it back here."

I shook my head. Chiaki had no idea about how demanding my request was. Mafuyu lowered her head and stared at her right hand.

"Forget it, I get it. I'll go back on stage by myself. Stupid Mafuyu!"

"Oi! Chiaki!"

I chased Chiaki and ran to the stage. A wave of cheers from the audiences came assaulting us immediately. As I took a look at the area beneath the stage, all I could see was a sea of people whose face I couldn't see properly because of the stage lights. I could feel goosebumps on my body - Chiaki..... she's been fighting alone this whole time in a place like this?

I could faintly hear the yells of Furukawa or some other people from behind me, but it's already too late. I was standing on the stage looking at over one hundred people





beneath me, and their blood vessels were already infused with the drugs administered by Chiaki. At the place before me - on the stage to the audiences' right, was my Aria Pro II bass on its stand waiting for me.

I could no longer head back. There's something injected into my blood vessels as well - I was burning up. At the instance when I touched the neck of my bass, I could feel a sweet surge of electricity flowing into me. Despite the fact that my legs were trembling from my nervousness, my mind was in a surprisingly clear state. What should we do? Senpai's not here yet, and Mafuyu's still standing behind me stiffly..... if only one of them were to take the stage. There's nothing I can do alone - I've already exhausted myself bringing Mafuyu here.

"..... Nao, wait..... I'm sorry....."

Chiaki stuck her head out of the drums and said to me in a hoarse voice,

"My legs feels weak. I've probably went too hard just now..... Please give me a moment, since I can't step the pedals right now. Ahaha, what a problem we have here."

I looked at Chiaki's slumped thighs in despair. I could begin to hear the boos from the crowd beneath us.

"Sorry, I have to rest a little longer." Chiaki's voice sounded like she was close to tears. Chiaki had been fighting by herself on stage, but what about me? Can I do that as well? But I can't. I could only carry my bass and do nothing with my back facing the audiences. In the first place, this is a situation that you can't face alone. I looked towards the side of the stage. Mafuyu was squatting next to the wall and looking at me with a painful expression on her face, while Furukawa and Hiroshi were behind her discussing something. It seemed like Hiroshi finally gave in. He lifted both of his arms above his head - and both of them took out their own guitars from the cases.





Ah. Is this where everything will end?

I finally brought Mafuyu here after many difficulties, but it's already too late. When I realized it; when I ran out of this place; when I was looking for her; when we returned together - everything's already too late.

Just then—

There was a change in the atmosphere of the livehouse.

My ears had picked up the slight change - there's a brief gush of wind, followed by a strength that supports me, who was at the brink of collapsing.

I steadied myself and turned around to face the audience. Behind the staggering crowd was the opened soundproof door. The person standing there had long black hair tied up together in a braid, and it was fluttering along to the escaping hot air - just like the tail feathers of a bird.

A few of the viewers close to the door had noticed it and turned their heads around. The silhouette swung her arms and tossed out something. I could barely catch the glittering object that soared above the crowd in darkness. The sharp sound of rubber squeaked through the microphones. The audience died down in an instant, and a moment of silence fell onto us.

"..... What's this?" "What just happened?" "Who's that?" "Eh? What?"

Small ripples began to form. However, all I was looking at was the thing in my hand - a tape with the title of its song clearly labelled on it.

I see, it's this song!





Somehow, it feels like Senpai already knew everything right from the start.

"..... Senpai?" Chiaki whispered. I fed the tape into the tape recorder that belonged to Mafuyu, which was hanging right beneath the microphone. The moment I pressed the play button, the cheers from the audience rang once again. The crowd split into two, and that person began to make her way grandly up the stage that's bathed in colorful lights.

Senpai looked at me, Chiaki and finally Mafuyu. She then put on a gentle smile.

Just then, the melody of the piano began to play.

The spinning tape recorder was playing out the crisp chords of the piano, and the microphone that had its head lowered was gently picking up the sounds that was being released. I immediately knew what was going on here, so Mafuyu should know too.

Even though it was chopped into segments in the hands of Kagurazaka-senpai and pieced together again to form another song, I could still recognize it immediately upon hearing it - it's the sound of the piano played by Mafuyu.

Senpai allowed the melody of the piano to continue flowing as her back continued to face the audience. At the same time, she said to everyone with a low but clear voice—

"Not all of our members are here yet."

Chiaki tilted her head in confusion. As for Mafuyu, she had raised her head in shock and was looking at Senpai.





Indeed, not all of the members of feketerigó are here yet. Even though Mafuyu's physically here, her soul's not here.

Therefore—

"As usual, let's start by warming up with the songs of The Eagles till everyone's here!"

Upon seeing the energy returning to Chiaki's eyes, Senpai turned around and grabbed onto the microphone. I gently buried the chords of my bass onto the crisp sounds of Mafuyu's piano.

Next, Senpai's voice joined into the foray—

<[The Last Resort](#)>

It's a hoarse singing voice of a traveler who traveled over the seas while bringing along only his body and his life.

<The Last Resort> is the last track in the album of The Eagle's <Hotel California>, and it's a requiem dedicated to the native Americans whose homeland was plundered, sullied and destroyed. It's a slow and sad song. Right now, the melody that's carrying the song is actually segments plucked out from Beethoven's piano sonata - though I wonder how many people had actually noticed that?

It's probably only the few of us here. Piano Sonata No. 30 in E major — what's being played is the variations of the final movement, which is <[Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung](#)>, a title written in German by Beethoven. [TLNote: which I think translates roughly as "Cantabile with Heartfelt Emotion" or something. I can't into German.]





How long did it take for Senpai to achieve something like that? She had obtained the source of the music from Mafuyu's CD, arranged them together without changing the tempo of the pieces, and changed it into a song sung by The Eagles. That was indeed what I had asked her to do. It may sound easy on paper, but she had actually done it for me.

And that's the reason why Mafuyu is here right now.

Even though it's just series of notes connected together and spewed out from the shabby tape recorder that was hanging from the microphone stand, Senpai, Chiaki and I had all found Mafuyu in there.

Mafuyu should have found it too, right? The place she is in our hearts. She's not playing anything and only listening from afar, but that's even more reason for her to understand — to understand the reason for her to be here.

The hard sounds of the cymbals were gradually fading away as we entered into the second chorus, and Chiaki's drums came in right after. The colors of the silently swaying audience was exactly like that of the sea which exists in the eyes of Mafuyu, while the sound of Mafuyu's piano was heading straight into that sea. The sextuplets of the forth variation were wobbling along with the waves. When the singing part of the song was over, Senpai used her Les Paul guitar to engage in a really lengthy exchange where her guitar and the piano entwined together, and with that we entered the sixth variation.

However, my steps stopped right there.

The melody of Mafuyu's piano was about to come to an end, but <The Last Resort> was far from over. When the scale changed into G major, the requiem of the Indians will become our elegy—





I began to pray. Finally, Mafuyu's piano had reached its end, and what's left was the melody of my bass, as well as the sounds of Senpai's guitar as it mimicked the cries of the seagulls. Mafuyu has disappeared. A void opened up in our sound.

The singing of Senpai sounded like a prayer too — filled with overflowing hope, which gave her a reason to bleed. *In the name of destiny and the name of God.* What a helpless and cruel line it is. And thus everyone left her — Senpai's singing was echoing in nothingness.

However—

Suddenly, I noticed it. There's someone there. On the other side of the melody of Senpai, and above Chiaki's tempo that's entering in slowly - the sound is right next to me. The melody sounded way too natural. It's as though the melody had branched off from my bass, and is extending into the sky endlessly. It gently encased itself around the sounds of Senpai's Les Paul guitar. As I breathed the accompaniment of the chorus into the mike, I narrowed my eyes and looked towards the other side of the stage.

Behind Senpai's tall silhouette, I could see a golden shimmer. It's the maroon hair that's glittering under the dazzling stage lights.







For a moment, I wondered if that was just a hallucination of mine. I mean, my ears could always hear things that aren't there. But thankfully, that's not an illusion at all. Senpai then sang out the final prayers. It's a song that portrays the helplessness of those who had their homeland stolen from them, to those who plundered the homeland of the others.

— *They call it paradise*
I don't know why —
— *You call someplace paradise,*
kiss it goodbye —

As though Senpai's melodious voice was sucked into darkness, all that's left were the sounds of the guitars that's streaming out constantly. One of the guitars sketched out the finale of the song, while the melody of the other flew its way into the faraway skies.

I took another look towards the other side of the stage. It really isn't my hallucination - Mafuyu's right there, plucking the strings of her Stratocaster with her slender, fair and mirage-like right hand. The cymbals behind her clashed, and the sea of people beneath us erupted into a roar.

I could hardly remember what happened after that.

The clash of solos between Mafuyu and Senpai's guitar continued for five minutes, and they might have went on longer if it wasn't for me stopping them. There was no time for us to rest after <The Last Resort> was over. The audience beneath us were already urging us impatiently by stomping on the floor.

We didn't converse much on stage, since each and every second up there is precious





to us. The many things that had slowly gathered in us over the two months were hurled beneath the stage in one go in thirty minutes. Some of them might have drowned from that.

Once we were done with digesting all the songs, we were cheered off the stage as we walked away with our bodies drenched in sweat. Chiaki could no longer stand, so thank god Senpai got to her before she fell onto the floor.

Hiroshi and his band members, together with the other band that consisted of middle-aged members, were all putting on smiles on their faces. The only person to put on a grumpy expression was none other than Furukawa. However, that grumpy person then spoke,

"Oi. You guys are the opening act, but for some reason there are some people down there who are demanding an encore."

He pointed towards the stage rather unwillingly - it's just as he had said! The sounds of clapping and stomping from the audience were coming to us in a rhythmic manner, which sounded like the ground was rumbling. I had already planned to succumb myself to the rather comfortable fatigue, so I showed an apologetic smile and replied,

"Urm..... but the amount of time for the concert's limited....."

"Quit complaining! Get on the stage now, or else the building will just collapse onto us."

Furukawa kicked me on my back. It seemed like the staff had no intention of moving the instruments on stage either, and they were all looking in our direction. I guess we had no choice but to do it.

I then shot a glance at Senpai. She had allowed the exhausted Chiaki to sit on her





thighs, and then she said to me,

"Looks like we'll have to allow Comrade Chiaki to take a rest. You two can take the stage!"

Us two..... both of us? And that means—

I looked at Mafuyu. There was a red hue to her fair skin, and the colors of her eyes were the same colors of the summer sky.

"See, this is the name of our band!"

Senpai patted Chiaki on her chest. The logo of feketerigó was printed on that area of her T-shirt.

"So there can only be one song for our encore."

Mafuyu had already nodded her head in agreement before I could react. She stepped onto the stage without any hint of hesitation. The neat sounds of clapping and stomping then shattered into pieces of applause. It was when I looked at Mafuyu carrying her guitar on her shoulder without fear that I realized this - despite the difference in the genre, Mafuyu's still a professional musician, so she's already used to all these things.

The only problem is, that doesn't apply to me. Just as I was procrastinating, Mafuyu looked me in the eyes briefly. She then used her thumb and index finger to play that song — <Blackbird>.

With that, I was forced to go on stage as well.





The spotlights and Mafuyu's face were all so dazzling - I couldn't pay any attention to whether I had sung well or not at all.





303

Chapter 11

Rainbow



303





I remember Hiroshi saying before about how he would sometimes swap roles with Furukawa to form a joker band that focuses on laughing at how bad each other was. But after listening to them in person at the resting area, I couldn't help but to tsukkomi at them in my heart — in no way was that bad at all!

I actually preferred Furukawa's vocals. According to the information Chiaki gave me, Furukawa's professional accompaniment with his vocals is one of the reasons why Melancholy Chameleon's concerts are so spectacular.

Speaking of which, the thing that made me depressed the most was the main act - a band that is made up of four middle-aged guys. It consisted of a piano trio and a guitar. During their self-introduction at the backstage, there's an elementary school teacher, a guy who runs a sweets shop, and a construction worker and stuff. My initial impression of them being "just an amateur band" was shattered in an instant right from the start of their very first song. Despite them being so incredibly good, they actually only play in their spare time?

"It would be really depressing if you listen to those old guys when your new singles aren't selling well."

Hiroshi whispered to me jokingly.

So that's the reason for putting them as the main act instead of that band of yours which consists of two professionals? So you guys are actually just the appetizers?

"But we don't call them old guys for nothing. They are impressive when they start out, but they'll tire out as they go on. It's quite interesting, so look forward to it!"

Well, it was really funny to see the later parts of their performance in a mess when the middle-aged guys started gulping iced vodka while they were still on stage.





The celebration party for the performance was not done at a pub, probably because they considered the fact that we're only in high-school. Instead, we went to a Chinese restaurant. The second floor was filled with over twenty people, though some of them were customers that were unrelated to us. The whole situation was a mess, and it was made worse since the middle-aged guys had already drank alcohol even before they got there. The tatami room had cushions and short tables, which made it feel more like a hotel rather than a Chinese restaurant. As a result, we had relaxed ourselves a little too much. Some of the people even placed a few cushions together and laid on top of them.

Prior to the start of the celebration, Hiroshi and the other three members began playing rock-scissors-paper all of the sudden. It seemed like they were deciding on who would be the one to drive, meaning that the unlucky one won't be able to drink. The final duel was between Furukawa and Hiroshi, and the defeated Furukawa was visibly pissed.

However, Chiaki and Senpai chose to ignore Furukawa totally. With the laws of Japan totally erased from their minds, they began to binge on wine. Oi, someone stop them immediately!

"Senpai, when did you start to drink?"

I asked her meekly as I looked at her drinking cup after cup of Shaoxing rice wine.

"It is said that back in the olden Europe, the parents would feed their babies with gin if they cried in the middle of the night!"

..... Why are you telling me such a scary trivial knowledge!?





"Hey, Kyouko....." Hiroshi, who was sitting beside Kyouko, said this while drinking, "It's always my dream to marry a girl who's younger than me but holds her liquor better than me, and to let her take care of me for the rest of my life."

"I'm sorry, but I have my sweethearts already. There are about three of them."

I had no idea which of her words were true and which were fake.

"Speaking of which.....!"

Chiaki, who was sitting next to Senpai as well, was originally competing with the middle-aged guys in drinking. She then suddenly placed her glass down with a "hic!" and stood up.

"It seems like everyone's no longer pursuing the issue, but I still say that Mafuyu's actions today are unforgivable!"

Mafuyu was next to me eating the salad slowly. She flinched at that sudden statement.

"That's right! She was that close to betraying her comrades. That's quite a heavy offense!"

Senpai knelt on one of her knees, and put on a sinister smile on her face.

"S-Sorry!"

"There will be no need for the Special Investigation Team if an apology is all you need to solve everything!"

Chiaki said that before slamming her hands on the table. Mafuyu hid herself behind





my back in fear. Even though the middle-aged guys had no idea what was going on, they joined in the fun with, "Yeah, pay with your body!"

"I heard that Comrade Ebisawa had no idea how important she is in our hearts?"

"B-But I....."

They were obviously bullying her. But I'll definitely be in for some deep trouble should I interrupt them now, so I had no choice but to remain silent.

"Then..... what do you want me to do?"

Came Mafuyu's voice, which sounded like she was close to tears. You can't say that yourself! Chiaki pulled her body over as though she was about to step over the table, and placed an empty whiskey glass in front of Mafuyu.

"Drink."

A caramel-colored liquid flowed out from within the glass bottle. No wait. But that's Shaoxing rice wine, yeah?

"I-I can't drink."

"Don't worry. I'll add sugar in it for you." Chiaki dumped a huge spoonful of sugar into the whiskey glass. I can't see how that will solve the problem.

"Chiaki, calm down, don't enter into your old-man mode!"

"Can't I? I'll become an old man anyway!" Like hell you will! You're a girl! "Geez! If we let Mafuyu off the hook this time, she'll definitely do something again that will bring the band on the brink of dissolving!"





That has nothing to do with the band dissolving or not— Hey, wait! Before I could stop her, a desperate Mafuyu had already held her breath and brought the glass before her lips.

In the next instant, Mafuyu collapse on the floor with her face flushed red, and what came right after were the sounds of cheers. Oh please, she's not performing a stunt here! God damn those drunkards!

I carried the flushed Mafuyu to the restroom. Mafuyu's face had already turned slightly green when we were on our way back. Just as I was about to help her back to her seat, I nearly bumped into someone at the turn of the corridor. I raised my head and saw a pair of squinting eyes below a bandanna - it's Furukawa.

"Ah, s-sorry..... Urm, well, it's been hard on you today."

"You'll have to work harder in many areas!"

"Right." I shrunk my neck. Just then, Mafuyu struggled a little beside me.

"..... Thank you..... for earlier."

Mafuyu raised her head and murmured that towards Furukawa. I had no idea what she was referring to, so I turned my head around and looked at her.

"Earlier on..... he helped me connect my guitar to the wiring."

I then turned to face Furukawa again. I see, so that's the reason Mafuyu appeared onstage so suddenly. Furukawa's frowned and stared at Mafuyu's hand for a long





while before saying,

"Your right hand can't move..... but by how much?"

"Eh.....?"

"Y-You can see that?" I was way more surprised than Mafuyu was.

"All it took is a look for me to realize that. Don't underestimate a guitarist! If you continue to play it the way you do, there won't be any future for you."

Mafuyu looked at her hand, and fell into silence. She then squeezed past me to make her way back to her seat first. I was about to follow her, but Furukawa grabbed me by my shoulders.

"..... Is there anything you want?"

"Are you planning on staying in that band forever?"

Furukawa asked me with a frown. I nodded my head rather unnaturally. Why did he ask that?

"You should quit for the sake of the band."

"Eh? W-Why?"

"Your standards are a mile away from the rest of the members!"

Whoa! I knew that very well myself, but it still hurts to hear him pointing it out directly.





"You know that as well, right?"

"I do, but....."

My gaze landed on my fingers.

I opened my left hand and clenched it up again. I then lifted my head to look at Furukawa.

"..... This is my band."

"Is that so? Do as you wish then."

Furukawa pushed me hard by my shoulder towards the direction of the seats. Just as I was about to head back, I could hear another of his sentence coming from behind me.

"If you guys give me that sort of bullshit again next time, I'll definitely punch you till you drop."

Despite being severely reprimanded by him, I was quite thankful for that last line — it means that we still have a chance next time.

"So there's a next time huh. Well said."

I was shocked by that sudden line. I turned my head around. Standing on the corridor was Kagurazaka-senpai, and behind her was the drunk Chiaki.

"The sexual harassment inside there is getting out of hand, so we ran out!" Chiaki ran





over and grabbed Mafuyu by her arm. Mafuyu almost turned around and ran away in fright.

"It's time for us to hold an evaluation meeting. Mafuyu, you can't run away even if you want to!"

"Uhh....."

Chiaki pulled the teary Mafuyu towards the direction of the stairs. I had no idea if she was still drunk or sober.

The four of us gathered at the entrance that leads to the first floor, and began our evaluation meeting.

"Since we're a revolution army, why don't we start by evaluating ourselves? Let's surround Mafuyu and yell out what we think, okay? That's what they always do during sports activities and such."

"That's just plain bullying!" And where the heck did Chiaki get those ideas from?

"That's already outdated! We're in the twenty-first century now. The modern-day revolutionists should do their self-evaluation like this....."

"Hyaa!"

Kagurazaka-senpai suddenly locked both of Mafuyu's arms behind her back, and began to tickle her by her armpit. It just so happens that I was sitting two steps below them - I was kicked by Mafuyu as she was struggling, and was that close to rolling down the stairs.

"Y-Y-Ya!" Mafuyu kept twisting about in Senpai's bosom.





"The self-evaluation's not over yet, Comrade Ebisawa, so stop your useless struggling!"

"Stop this for now!"

I couldn't help but to interrupt them by prying them apart. This time, Mafuyu hid herself behind Chiaki. And as for Chiaki, she patted Mafuyu on her head to console her.

"Young man, you're quite lacking in your critical judgement!"

"You just want to sexually harass her, yeah!?"

"But it should feel comfortable, right? Of course, I'm not saying it in a sexual connotation....."

Senpai suddenly pulled her body close to Mafuyu and looked at her face. Does she not know when to stop? I was planning on dissing her a little, but I suddenly noticed the gloom that's looming in her eyes, so I shut my mouth instead.

There should only be one thing that she's really asking - it should have felt really great when we were performing live, right?

That's what Senpai's eyes were telling me.

I turned my head, and saw Mafuyu timidly sticking her head out from Chiaki's back. After staring at her own right hand for a while, she nodded her head slightly.

Senpai gave a sigh of relief, and that wasn't something I had imagined in mind.





"Well then....."

Senpai stood between us and stuck out her hand with the palm facing downwards.

"There's a chance for us next time."

The very first person to place her right hand above was Chiaki.

I then stretched out my hand, as though I was attempting to cover their hands.

Finally, Mafuyu stretched out her right hand as well — the hand that lacks strength, which fingers were unable to open out fully, and was so dreamily pale and slender. But to us, it's a right hand that we could not do without. She placed it above our hands.

It's already late into the night when the party was over. A few of the drunkards were planning for a round two while they are still on a high. More than a dozen of the drunks had gathered and stood motionlessly along the dark sidewalk in front of the Chinese restaurant as though they were some sort of factory waste.

"I feel so dizzy....."

Mafuyu moaned as she leaned her whole body weakly against my shoulders beneath the flickering streetlight. Even though she only drank a single cup of wine (and more like spitting it out immediately after she sipped it), it seemed like a hangover was beginning to kick in on her.

"Are you feeling unwell?"





"Not to that stage yet."

"Then why don't Mafuyu join us for round two as well!" But Chiaki's unreasonable invitation was rejected.

"I'm going home."

Mafuyu carried her guitar - or more like she's being supported by the guitar - and walked unsteadily on the streets of the night. Wait, you're not planning to walk home by yourself?

"I'll send you back! It's faster with a bicycle."

"What!? Nao's not joining us?" Chiaki sounded flustered. "But Senpai said she's going as well!"

"I can't drink. Moreover, Tetsurou's gonna complain if I get home late."

Though it's not because he's worried about me, but about his breakfast for tomorrow instead.

"Oh, I see." Somehow, Chiaki's smile was a little forced. "Then see you tomorrow!"

"Mmm, tomorrow— but it's Sunday?"

Even if it's the holidays, club activities can only be carried out during the weekdays.

"What are you talking about? I'll pop up at your house tomorrow morning before going home, so remember to prepare ochazuke for me!" [TLNote: Chazuke's wiki [here](#)]





"..... Fine."

Chiaki was about to rejoin the group of drunkards who had begun moving in small separate groups. Mafuyu, who had been grabbing my arm the whole time, suddenly called out to her.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for today..... and sorry."

"But I've done nothing." Chiaki smiled.

Nothing of that sort. I actually wanted to thank her as well.

It's because Chiaki was around, because she had been there waiting for us—

"Won't..... Chiaki be sad?"

Chiaki tilted her head in response to Mafuyu's question. I turned my head around to look at Mafuyu's slightly green face from the side.

"Go along with Kyouko now. But didn't you say before that you're the same as me?"

"I'm not sad. It's much more painful if we cannot be together."

I had no idea what Chiaki's talking about, but it seemed like Mafuyu did. She showed a teary smile and nodded her head.

"So I'll drown you in vodka should you pull another disappearing act!"

"Sorry!" Mafuyu cowered in fear.





Chiaki ran away from us while waving her hands. Mafuyu then sighed uncomfortably. She doesn't look like she can stand properly at all.

I sent Mafuyu back home on my bicycle, but the journey was much more difficult compared to ferrying her to the livehouse during the evening. It's because she had leaned almost her whole body against me, and I had to carry her guitar as well as my bass. Moreover, I couldn't see too well since it was dark.

The only improvement was that it was way cooler than the evening.

I chose to ride slowly along a lane without any cars. I could hear the cries of the insects, the sounds of the car engines coming from faraway, as well as the *jiri-jiri* sounds from the dynamo of the bicycle's light.

"Naomi....."

When we were riding along the road next to the dikes, the silent Mafuyu behind me suddenly spoke.

"Hmm?"

"Actually..... I was lying when I said that my whole right hand was immobile right down to the wrist."

"I know."

"How did you know!?"





Oi! Stop! Don't headbutt the person in front of you when he's cycling with two people on board! The bicycle that Mafuyu and I were on was slithering along the road like a snake.

"Because you were grabbing on to me tightly while I was escorting you over to the livehouse!"

"Ah....."

"..... Oi! Don't loosen your grip! What if you fall off!"

That's dangerous. Just what exactly does she want!

"So you pretended to believe in my lie despite knowing all along? Idiot!"

She suddenly became angry for no rhyme or reason. What's going on now?

Though to put it more accurately, I wasn't a hundred percent sure if Mafuyu was lying or not - I just felt that there's a possibility of it being a lie. Regardless, all the possibilities would have dropped to zero if I didn't bring Mafuyu along with me forcibly back then.

"You know, I wasn't really joking when I asked you to play with your teeth! You should be able to do it since you're that good, right?"

"How could I have done that!?"

I suffered yet another headbutt on my back again. Man, that hurts.

"Are you content as long as you can listen to me playing the guitar?"





"Well..... not just the guitar. There's also the piano as well..... didn't I say so before?"

"That's not what I mean.....!"

I could feel the air behind me became incredibly scary all of the sudden, as though someone was about to strangle me by my neck.

"Actually, I don't really like the original way you play the guitar. Your techniques are good, but....."

"You're just jealous!"

"Shush! But now, it won't do if you're not around....."

That was my heartfelt thought that I couldn't convey to her earlier via words.

Mafuyu headbutted me thrice, before saying,

"Say it once more."

"Hmm?"

"But now..... what?"

"It won't do if you're not around.....?" She didn't understand the meaning behind those words? "It's because for both Senpai and Chiaki, your guitar is—"

"Kyouko or Chiaki, that doesn't matter. What about you?"

"..... Eh? Urm, I really like the way you play your guitar now! Somehow, it feels





different from how you would play back when you were playing alone. The way in which you play has changed as well, right?"

Mafuyu pressed her forehead on the area close to my shoulder blade, and fell silent for a long while. We were already on the national highway, and there's only a short distance to go before we pass the overhead bridge and reach the railways. We'll be quite close to Mafuyu's house after we go past the railroad gates.

"Me too."

I could feel Mafuyu's murmurs on my back.

"I'm in love..... with Naomi's....."







I braked hard on my bicycle before the crosswalk. Mafuyu's head swayed behind me.

Did she just..... say something really strange? No wait, or was I just imagining things?

"Hey, Mafuyu."

"Don't stop all of the sudden! The guitar knocked into my leg."

"No, wait..... Just now—"

There was the sudden sound of a ringtone which interrupted my words. It's from Mafuyu's phone. She got off the passenger seat and pulled out her phone from her pocket. Who's the one calling her?

"..... It's from Hitomi." Mafuyu frowned when she looked at the screen of her phone. Hitomi? Who's that? I took a look at the screen, and it came to my mind - Miss Matsumura.

I called Miss Matsumura right after our performance to tell her that I had already found Mafuyu, and told her not to worry. But it's already this late into the night - I should have made another call to her.

"..... Yes? Mmm. We'll be there soon. We're almost at the train station, and we'll head right back..... Eh? E-Eh?"

Mafuyu's voice was becoming more and more flustered. What's going on?

After hanging up the phone and stuffing it back into her pocket, Mafuyu carried her guitar and jumped onto the passenger seat of the bicycle.





"H-Hurry! Just go somewhere, anywhere!"

"Eh? What do you mean by anywhere? We're about to reach your house, no?"

"I don't wanna! I don't want to go home today!"

I was stunned. At the crossroad in the middle of the night, Mafuyu was hugging me tightly from behind—

And she said she doesn't want to go home—

No wait, calm down. It's probably..... not that.....

"Quickly!"

Under the urge from Mafuyu's headbutt, I began to pedal the bicycle slowly. Just as we went past the crossroad, a powerful beam of lights from a car came shining in front of us. The car roared to a stop diagonally-right in front of us.

It's a foreign-made car that I was familiar with, and I immediately knew the reason behind Mafuyu's fluster. The door to the driver's seat flung open, and the person who stepped out of the car was none other than—

"What time is it now!? I-It's so late already, and..... and she's together with you!? Just what is happening around here!?"

I almost fell off from my seat in fright after seeing the incredibly scary face of the furious Ebichiri.

"Eh? Why.....? Urm, you're back in Japan already?" I thought you were in Boston?





"I've just returned not too long ago!"

Whoa! That's just too much of a coincidence! Mafuyu was hugging me tightly and hiding herself behind my back. I don't know if it was due to the shock, the fear or the tiredness, but I was already ramming hard on the pedals before I knew it. Ebichiri's angry roar disappeared behind us before long, and all that was left was Mafuyu's warmth behind me.

The winds of the summer night brushed by my ears. I could almost hear the words that Mafuyu had said earlier, but I was no longer in the mood to ask her about it again. There's just too many things that cannot be conveyed with words alone.

I cycled around the places close to her house, and in the end I sent Mafuyu back home.

As for the hollers of Ebichiri, the cold glares of Miss Matsumura and the two Dobermans baring their fangs at me — I don't think it's necessary for me to go into details about them.

Overwhelmed by fatigue, I slept through most of Sunday—

And then Monday came.

It's the first time we gathered after the performance.

I had overslept by a lot, so I stopped by a convenience store while on my way to school to buy some cold drinks as an apology. The strap of the bass case dug hard





into my shoulders, and it was soaked with sweat as I was burning under the harsh sunlight of summer. That felt really uncomfortable.

I was revitalized when I finally reached the much cooler courtyard at the back of the school.

Just then, I could hear the sound of music.

It came from the clubroom. The door was opened slightly as something was stuck in between - I could hear the sturdy sounds of the drums, the crisp sounds of the guitar as well as the singing of Senpai coming from within the room.

Why are they playing with the door opened? Ah, I remember Senpai saying something like getting the blouse to stick on their skin from their sweat or something..... Oh please, don't tell me you're really carrying it out!

I had already walked right up to the clubroom, but I stopped in my tracks when I realized the song that they were playing inside. It's <Desperado>. There's no way I could be wrong about it.

But Senpai said before that she definitely won't sing that song.

I leaned against the concrete wall of the old music room and concentrated on seeking Senpai's voice.

Somehow, I think I can now understand the reason she did that.

Her very first band was dissolved on the very next day after Senpai had sung that on stage by herself.

There's a depressing reason behind it, but that song must be something really special





to her. And that's the reason why she could no longer sing it again after that.

And it feels like I can understand the reason for us to practice on the songs of The Eagles whenever everyone's not there yet. Despite them experiencing many changes to their members, the songs of The Eagles still sound as solid as ever. Even if it is a song that's formed by overlapping the sounds of various guitars, they were still able to replicate it perfectly once they hit the stage. Moreover, all the members in the band are the vocalists, so the chorus will sound especially rich.

As long as someone's not there, the missing void will be incredibly obvious - that's the sort of band they are.

And the reason we play it each and every time is because Senpai wanted to confirm that fact—

..... Wait! Mafuyu, stop playing the beats of the bass as well! That just feels really depressing! Did they actually realize that I'm not around?

I then recalled Furukawa's words from the celebration party, and my feelings sunk even lower.

"You should quit for the sake of the band."

It may be true that I'm the only one who's dragging the band down. However, I was finally able to say it out loudly and clearly—

"This is my band."

I readjusted the strap on my shoulders.

There's Chiaki, and there's Mafuyu as well.





feketerigó will be born once I walked in. Regardless of how sad the song that we're singing is, Senpai will never be on her own again.

I once again immersed myself in the Senpai's voice as she sang <Desperado>—

*Come down from your fences, open the gate
It may be rainin', but there's a rainbow above you*

Before the singing of the desperado came to an end, I was already grabbing onto the handlebar and pushing the slightly opened door.

-END-





CE LIGHT NOVEL TRANSLATION



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